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THE LORING MYSTERY

By Jeffery Farnol

The Broad Highway
The Amateur Gentleman
The Honorable Mr. Tawnish
Beltane the Smith
The Definite Object
Great Britain at War
Our Admirable Betty
The Geste of Duke Jocelyn
Black Bartlemy's Treasure
Martin Conisby's Vengeance
Peregrine's Progress
Sir John Dering
The Loring Mystery

THE LORING MYSTERY

BY

JEFFERY FARNOL

BOSTON
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1925

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THE LORING MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

Mr. Jasper Shrig Discourses on Capital Coves and "the Act"

The clock of St. Clement Danes was chiming the hour of eleven as Mr. Gillespie, folding up the brief which had engaged his attention all the evening, yawned, drained the last of his toddy and rose to betake himself to bed; indeed he had just taken up his chamber candle and was in the act of extinguishing the candelabrum upon the table when he paused and stood staring beneath puckered brows as a sudden knocking sounded upon the outer door.

For maybe a full minute Mr. Gillespie stood, his lank figure stooped a little forward, eyes fixed, grim lips close-set, listening to this soft yet very persistent rapping; then he crossed the cosy room to a bureau in a corner and opening a drawer took thence a ponderous horse-pistol; thus armed he reached for the candle and approached the front door, his age-worn slippers flip-flapping resolutely over the uneven flooring.

"Hullo!" cried he loudly. "Who is there?"

Here a hoarse murmur from beyond the stout oak.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "You must speak up!"

At this, the voice waxed louder and hoarser; whereupon Mr. Gillespie, as if reassured, set his unwieldy weapon upon the floor and proceeded to draw bolts, loose chains, unbar and turn massive key; whereupon

the heavy door swung open to discover a shortish, thick-set man who beamed and blinked upon Mr. Gillespie from the shadow of a hat extremely shaggy as to nap and wide as to brim.

"You keeps yourself werry partick'ler secure, Mr. Gillespie, sir!" said he, touching hat-brim with the knob of a stout and remarkably knobby stick. "Ay, secure is the vord, sir, vich ain't to be vondered at con-sidering that you, like me, are a objec' o' windictiveness to the wicious and per-werted, sir——"

"Ha, Shrig — confound it all!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie reproachfully. "What i' the name o' reason should bring you down on me at this time o' night?"

"Business, Mr. Gillespie, sir, — and Capital business at that!"

"Capital business, Shrig——?"

"Vith a capital C, sir."

"Ha, d'ye mean — Murder?"

"As ever vas, sir."

"Why then, step in, man, step in and let me fasten the door . . . though you might ha' chosen a better time——"

"Vich, sir, I vould take the liberty to remark, the better the deed the better the hour, for this here is a murder as should inter-est you oncommon, sir!"

"Hum!" quoth Mr. Gillespie dubiously; and, having shot the last bolt, led the way into his small, comfortable parlour and motioned his visitor to be seated, Mr. Shrig forthwith drew the second elbow-chair to the hearth, in doing which he dropped his hat, which gave forth a metallic clang.

"Eh!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie, starting. "You still wear your iron hat, it seems?"

"Steel, sir! Lined wi' steel — my own inwention, and though a bit 'eavyish p'r'aps, I've found it werry good agin' windictiveness in the form o' bludgeons, brick-bats, and a' occasional chimbley-pot."

So saying, Mr. Shrig smoothed his headgear's shaggy nap with caressing elbow and, placing it carefully upon the floor beneath his chair together with his knobbed stick, sat down, booted legs wide-planted, a hand upon each knee, and beamed placidly round the room.

A powerfully built man was Mr. Shrig, yet an extremely genial-faced man though of a sober habit of dress, who seemed to radiate an obtrusive mildness as he sat, albeit he possessed a very bright and roving eye.

"You keeps yourself as-tonishing snug, sir," said he, gently rubbing the knees of his cords, "snug an' likewise werry partick'ler cosy, sir!" Here his keen glance darted from the kettle purring softly on the hob and thence flashed to linger upon the empty toddy-glass upon the table; observing which Mr. Gillespie reached a bottle and another glass from the corner cupboard; quoth he:

"You are partial to lemon-peel, Shrig, I think?"

"Partial indeed, sir, and never more so than vhen you do the mixin'—for, sir, you can brew a toddy as is beat by none and ek'alled only by my pal Corporal Dick's Vun and Only, as I think you'll allow?"

"Ay, to be sure," nodded Mr. Gillespie, bending to his fragrant task, "Corporal Richard Roe hath a nice judgment in such matters. How is the Corporal?"

"Hearty, sir, hearty as ever!"

"Taste that!" said Mr. Gillespie, setting a steaming glass before his guest. Mr. Shrig raised the fragrant beverage to his lips, sipped it gravely and stared at the floor, sipped it again and glanced at the opposite wall, sipped it a third time and lifted eyes ecstatic to the ceiling:

"Ha!" said he, and the word was a sigh.

"How is it, Shrig?"

"Sir," he answered, viewing the glass in his hand with respectful avidity, "except for the Corporal's Vun and Only, I've sluiced my ivories vith nothing

novise to ek'al this here since last I occipied this werry same arm-chair."

"Ay, and when was that, Shrig?"

"Three veeks ago Toosday, sir, on the matter o' the 'eadless lady . . . the mootilated female corp', sir, the young voman as vas diskivered vithout her tibby, her napper, or as you might say her 'ead, sir."

"Ay, to be sure!" nodded Mr. Gillespie, reaching for his own glass. "I remember the case . . . you ran the murderer down, Shrig."

"Appre-'ended same arter a desprit struggle, a' oncommon wicious cove, sir! And betwixt us, you and me, ve had him dooly scragged . . . he's a-dangling a-top o' Shooter's 'Ill at this werry minute, sir, all nicely tarred and ironed——"

"And the heartless ruffian deserved it!" said Mr. Gillespie, frowning at the fire. "Richly deserved it."

"Vich desarved it is the vord, sir!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "And to-night, you an' me a-sittin' 'ere so nice and sociable, 't is a sweet an' comforting thought to know as 't was you and me set 'im a-sving on a werry 'igh gibbet vhere he von't do nobody no 'arm no more."

"Hum!" muttered Mr. Gillespie. "Ha! And what brings you here to-night at such an hour, Shrig?"

"First, sir, I'd like to ax a few questions, if so agreeable——"

"Which I shall answer or not as I think fit. Well, Shrig?"

"Werry good, sir. First then, you are lawyer to Sir Nevil Loring, Baronet, of Loring Chase, Sussex, I think?"

"I am. But how do you know this?"

"Second; you know as this 'ere Sir Nevil is not and never vas the rightful heir?"

Mr. Gillespie very nearly dropped his glass; therefore he set it down carefully and leaned forward to stare at Mr. Shrig, who blinked placidly at the fire.

"The great wonder is how you should chance to learn this!"

"Sir," continued Mr. Shrig, sipping his toddy with the greatest relish, "I likevise 'appen to know that Sir Nevil Loring had a twin brother, Humphrey by name, born 'arf an hour afore 'im and conseqvently the true heir. But this here Humphrey vas big and easy o' natur' and Nevil vas small and remarkable 'ard . . . moreover they both loved the same young lady, and she, being no fool, chose Humphrey, vereupon Nevil took on most ferocious . . . there vas even talk o' bloodshed — a dooel. But this vas years and years back. Howsomever, Humphrey married the lady, and to awoid further battle, murder or sudden death, took 'is share o' the fortun' an' emigrated to the Southern States of America, leaving Nevil in possession o' the title and estates."

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie, his sharp eyes keener than ever. "What more, Shrig?"

"V'y, sir, I likevise 'appen to know as Humphrey, dying not long ago, an' none too much money, leaves a son David, aged twenty-four. Vich son David, finding out all this 'ere family history, sells what property his father has left and takes ship to England werry determined to claim his right and dispossess his paternal uncle Sir Nevil Loring, Baronet, according to law. So there stands the case at present, Mr. Gillespie, sir. Am I right in my fax, ay or no, sir?"

"God bless my soul!" ejaculated the lawyer, staring at his companion beneath shaggy eyebrows knit in frowning perplexity while he rasped at his bony chin with long, nervous fingers like one very much at a loss.

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Shrig, nodding benignantly at the fire again. "So my fax is right? Though, to be sure, I knowed they vas, sir."

Something in the speaker's placid assurance seemed

to disconcert Mr. Gillespie so very much that he rose and took a turn up and down the room.

"Damme, Shrig!" he exclaimed at last, "how in the world d'ye know all this — this that hath been a secret buried these many years . . . how?"

"First of all, sir," answered Mr. Shrig, folding his powerful hands and beaming down at them. "First of all by obserwation, sir, deduction . . . addin' a bit here, subtractin' a bit theer and by con-clusions drawed according. And secondly, sir, all along of a most ree-markable co-insidence."

"But what should turn your attention to Sir Nevil Loring of all people in this teeming world?"

Mr. Shrig sipped his glass and smiled dreamily at the fire again.

"Why, Mr. Gillespie, sir, since you ax me so p'inted and since you are a gent as I respex both as lawyer and man, and as 'aving been associated in more than one Capital case, and nobody about to peep nor yet to pry . . . I'll tell ye! Sir, I have took, in a quiet way, a' amazin' power o' notice of Sir Nevil Loring, Baronet, though 'e don't know it, ever since I first clapped my peepers on 'im in these here werry chambers o' yourn, three year ago or thereabouts — stop a bit, I can give ye the day to a' hour, I 've got 'im all dooly wrote down in my little reader." And from the breast-pocket of his decent, brass-buttoned coat, Mr. Shrig brought forth a small notebook and opening it, turned the pages with thumb moistened for the purpose, conning over divers letters and names thus:

"I—J—K—L . . . Lambeth, Lacy, Lowell, Loring . . . ay, here 'e is! Loring, Sir Nevil, June twenty-one, eighteen-one-six. Age forty-nine. N.B. Werry extra special! There y'are, Mr. Gillespie, eighteen-one-six."

"But what 's it all mean, Shrig? I don't understand. Why your notes? What book is that?"

"Why, sir," replied Mr. Shrig, thrusting his little book carefully away, "I'll tell ye. Sir, I'm a law officer as you know — werry good! But, sir, I'm a collector likevise — werry good again! Sir, some collects picters, and others collects chaney and such-like odds an' ends, but I collects . . . capital coves and covesses."

"D'you mean — murderers?"

"Ay, I do, sir! I means men an' vomen as is born vith a nat'ral gift for murder . . . and, sir, I collects 'em afore the fact ——"

"Good God!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie, sitting down again rather suddenly. "Preposterous, man! Absurd! How can ye ——?"

"Sir, I'll tell ye! This here vorld is made up o' two sorts o' people — murder-ers and murder-ees, if you'll allow the vord — werry good! Now v'enever I spies a cove vith a face, or as you might say, a chevy, as bears all the ewidences o' your true murderer born, down goes the name o' that cove in my little reader wi' such partic'lers o' that cove's life as I can diskiver, and I vaits for that person, cove or covess, to commit the capital crime. . . . And, sir, I'm werry seldom disapp'inted! . . . I can smell murder in a capital cove, I can hear it in his woice, taste it in the werry air 'e breathes! . . . And, Mr. Gillespie sir," here Mr. Shrig leaned suddenly forward and sank his tones to a hoarse whisper, "if ever I see a true Capital o' Capitals, a downright out an' outer, 't is him the vorld has knowed so long as — Sir Nevil Loring!"

Mr. Gillespie's keen gaze shifted abruptly from the speaker's placid face to wander vaguely here and there; finally it focussed itself upon the dying fire, and he shivered suddenly:

"Pah!" he exclaimed, taking up his glass. "Stuff and nonsense! 'T was not to talk such mere folly you are here at such an hour?"

"No, sir . . . and now we come to the werry reemarkable co-insidence aforementioned. I am here, Mr. Gillespie, sir, perfess'onally to report to you, as Sir Nevil Loring's lawyer, the fact that the young gent David Loring aforesaid, Sir Nevil Loring's nevvy, come ashore this here werry night!"

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie, starting. "Do you mean he is already in London?"

"Ay, sir, he is."

"How — when did he arrive?"

"Sir, the young gent come ashore, somewheres about eight o'clock, towing astern o' Bill Bartrum's boat or, as you might say, wherry. Bill found 'im driftin' Blackfriars vay — below bridge."

The glass slipped from Mr. Gillespie's lax fingers and rolled across the floor, spilling its contents all unheeded:

"You — you mean —" he gasped, "you mean ——?"

"Dead, Mr. Gillespie, a corp', sir! But 'e 's nice an' fresh — ain't been in the vater long, I judge, though to be sure 'e 's lost most of his face. Still as I say, 'e 's nice an' fresh, sir, and thinking as you might like to take a peep at 'im I dropped down on ye, sir, though late the hour ——"

"Are you sure — quite sure it is young David Loring?"

"The letters and dockiments found on corp' proves i-dentity of same beyond all doubt, sir. And now, if you 're minded to run your heye over said corp' and dockiments, I 've a conweyance a-vaiting."

"What kind of night is it, Shrig?"

"Tolerable varmish, sir, though raining."

Mr. Gillespie rose, though reluctantly, and taking a pair of top-boots from adjacent corner, proceeded to get into them.

"Aged twenty-four!" quoth he, deliberately donning his many-caped, high-collared surtout. "Aged —

only twenty-four! So young and — terribly dead, eh, Shrig?"

"I never see a deader, sir, no, never in all my ——"

Mr. Shrig stopped suddenly and, in that self-same moment, the lawyer, reaching for his hat, let it fall as if it had burnt him; and thus they stood staring speechlessly upon one another while the place about them echoed and re-echoed to a loud and imperious knocking.

"Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, stooping swiftly for the knobbed stick. "Loud enough to vake the dead!"

CHAPTER II

Which Introduces Murder and Sir Nevil Loring

Candle in hand, Mr. Gillespie led the way to the front door and, the knocking having momentarily subsided, demanded to know who was there, but received no better answer than a series of double knocks which seemed louder and more imperious than ever; hereupon, with a backward glance toward the knobbed cudgel of the placid Shrig, Mr. Gillespie forthwith proceeded to loose bar, bolt, and chain; but scarcely had the heavy door creaked ajar than, uttering a strangled exclamation, he recoiled suddenly, but recovering himself immediately, bowed, for, framed in the doorway, backed by rain-filled darkness, stood a small, slender gentleman, a figure of surpassing elegance from the soles of his gleaming Hessian boots to the crown of his curly-brimmed hat. Very still he stood, slim, gloved hands crossed upon the gold knob of be-tasselled cane, head bowed and eyes curiously bright and watchful in the shadow of his hat-brim, while in his assured posture, his silence, his immutable serenity, was something vaguely disconcerting.

"Sir Nevil Loring!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie at last.

"Myself, man!" he answered, voice pleasingly modulated. "Though indeed and b'Gad, I might be a ghost, judging by your looks!"

"This very unexpected visit, Sir Nevil——"

"Nay, tush, Gillespie, you forget, I am Sir Nevil no longer, my heritage is passed, or rather passing from me . . . I am The Dispossessed, and must be Mr.

Loring henceforth. As for my unseasonable call, this so untimely visitation, let my approaching destitution plead my excuse. I am in town for a few days and happening to pass your Inn, I stopped for a word with you on my affairs — the approaching cataclysm that must shortly overwhelm me. . . . But I find you engaged, I fear?"

"Sir," answered Mr. Gillespie with an introductory motion of the hand, "you find me engaged upon your affairs with Mr. Shrig here. . . . This, sir, is Mr. Jasper Shrig of Bow Street."

"Indeed?" nodded Sir Nevil, favouring the law officer with a brief scrutiny. "Happy to make the acquaintance of Mr. Shrig of Bow Street."

"Servant, sir!" quoth Mr. Shrig, making a leg and beaming down into the eyes that glittered up at him. And Mr. Shrig looked into a handsome, strangely youthful face, clear-cut and exquisitely featured, unblemished by line or wrinkle, hairless of lip and cheek and framed in lustrous curls of dark-brown hair.

"And you were busied upon my affairs, Gillespie?"

"We were, sir. Pray step in!"

Sir Nevil obeyed; and instantly his youthful shapeliness, his elegance and dignified repose vanished and he became a limping, shambling, pitiful creature who hobbled, stooped upon his cane. And as the grace of his carriage was thus utterly marred by his awkward, halting gait, so was the classic beauty of his face by the eyes that gleamed and glittered beneath their heavy, veiling lids — lids, these, that rarely opened wide, for Age was there — and many other things.

Hobbling to the nearest chair, Sir Nevil sank into it and immediately appeared his unnaturally youthful and dominating self.

"Mr. Jasper Shrig of Bow Street!" he repeated, viewing that officer between narrow, languorous-drooping lids. "The name is not familiar. Pray, Gillespie,

what have my affairs to do with Mr. Shrig of Bow Street?"

"Sir," answered Mr. Gillespie, very gravely, "Mr. Shrig is here to-night to inform us that Fate decrees you are to remain Sir Nevil all your days, for Sir David Loring that was — your brother Humphrey's son — is dead."

The tasselled cane fell from Sir Nevil's small, delicately-gloved hand, his smooth chin vanished amid the snowy frills at his breast and he remained thus a while, motionless and silent; but Mr. Shrig, stooping for the cane, saw his eyes very wide open, and, forgetful of the cane, drew slowly back and sat rubbing his knees softly and gazing placidly at the fire again.

At last Sir Nevil spoke, his voice soft and musical as ever:

"Dead, Gillespie? Can it be possible — and he so young. . . . Dead! I do not pretend to any extravagant grief, never having known the youth . . . but so young, and — dead! When did he die, and where?"

"There are grave suspicions, Sir Nevil, that . . . that the unfortunate young gentleman met his end——"

"By murder!" quoth Mr. Shrig, so suddenly that Mr. Gillespie started. But Sir Nevil neither stirred nor so much as raised his head, and there ensued a silence wherein no one spoke or moved, an uneasy silence as of growing expectancy; only Mr. Shrig's roving eye flitted from the hearth, across the strip of worn drugget to Sir Nevil's slender, beautifully-shod foot and hovered there a moment, thence it crept up Sir Nevil's shapely leg, over the elegant lines of frogged surtout, up snowy shirt-frill, and so at last to that delicately handsome, strangely youthful face wherein two glittering eyes, ages old, watched him serenely beneath their pallid, drooping lids; meeting which look, Mr. Shrig blinked, coughed faintly behind square-tipped fingers and beamed down at his own booted legs.

At length Sir Nevil stirred and spoke in his pleasant voice:

"Murdered? Are you sure?"

"Murdered, sir!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "And I vas never surer."

"Why so, Officer? Pray be more explicit! How and where was my unfortunate nephew found?"

"In the river!" answered Mr. Shrig, his gaze roving to Sir Nevil's boots again.

"Ha — drowned?"

"Throttled!" corrected Mr. Shrig, his glance now upon those slim, gloved hands. "Strangled, sir, choked to death! And from ewidences o' wi'lence upon the corp', throttled by hands twice — ah, four times as big as yourn." Here Mr. Shrig sighed plaintively and shaking his head, stared thoughtfully down at his own top-boots again.

"A terrible affair, Sir Nevil!" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie. "A dreadful, unchancy business!"

"And yet," demurred Sir Nevil, "what evidence can you advance, what proofs have you that shall satisfy me this unfortunate is indeed my nephew David Loring?"

"Oceans, sir!" answered Mr. Shrig promptly, "Dockiments and letters, sir, a leather vallet stuffed full on 'em . . . old letters an' noo letters and among 'em vun addressed to your werry own self, Sir Nevil Loring, Baronet! Likevise there is — stop a bit!" Here Mr. Shrig dived a hand into one of his numerous pockets and brought thence a folded paper, which he smoothed out upon his knee, glanced at and carefully repocketed: "Likevise sir, a minnytoor of a female in a gold frame, a gold vatch bearing on case the monnygram H. L., likevise a gold ring in form of a snake wi' emmyrald eyes, likevise a net-purse vith fifteen guineas no more and no less and that 's the lot."

"I was about to accompany Mr. Shrig for the pur-

pose of viewing the body and papers in question," added Mr. Gillespie.

"And I've a hackney-coach a-vaiting, sirs ——"

"Then you may discharge it!" quoth Sir Nevil, stooping for his cane.

"Dis-charge it, sir?"

"I said so, my good man! There is ample room in my carriage, for I intend to accompany you."

"Werry good, sir!" answered Mr. Shrig, rising with sudden alacrity. "You speaks, sir, and I obeys!" saying which he departed forthwith; whereupon Mr. Gillespie rose as if to follow, then paused, for Sir Nevil still remained seated, his narrowed gaze upon the dying embers, as if lost in profound thought.

"Gillespie," he enquired, suddenly, "is yonder fellow in charge of this case?"

"Evidently, sir, nor could it be in better hands."

"Ha — do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. Jasper Shrig is remarkably astute though you might not judge as much from his looks. He is what I might term a specialist in murder, and, to my knowledge, has hunted a great many criminals to the gallows."

"Indeed?" murmured Sir Nevil. "Though to be sure, I remark in him a gift of observation."

"And his methods are highly original . . . absurdly so!"

"Why absurdly, Gillespie?"

"He pretends to a gift . . . an abnormal instinct whereby he can sense murder in a person — before the fact is committed, which is the most arrant nonsense, of course!"

"Preposterous!" murmured Sir Nevil. "Yet, my dear Gillespie, abnormality amuses me . . . let us rejoin the worthy officer."

"At once, if you are ready, Sir Nevil. . . . Will you take my arm?"

"No, no, Gillespie — demme no! Though I am such a miserable cripple . . . thanks to good brother Humphrey . . . I can still contrive to walk unaided, I thank you! Pray lead the way, sir."

CHAPTER III

Describes How Mr. Shrig Obtained a Clue

Mr. Shrig, meanwhile, coming out into the Strand, beheld a travelling chariot drawn up before the Inn, a luxurious vehicle, its cushioned interior lighted by a small lamp in the roof; beyond this princely equipage stood a hackney-coach, its driver crouched somnolent upon the box despite falling rain; approaching this vehicle Mr. Shrig thrust his head in at the open window and, peering into the dark interior, spoke in a hoarse whisper:

"Are ye there, Dan'l?"

"Ay, ay, Jarsper!"

"Then — in your listenin'-cheat!" Instantly a dim form leaned forward into whose attentive ear Mr. Shrig whispered sibilantly.

"The shadderin'-lay is it, Jarsper? Ay, ay! An' 'ow long in London — right-o!"

"Report to me t'morrer-morning at 'The Gun,' Dan'l!"

"Ay, ay, Jarsper. An' wheer now?"

"The ken in Giles' Rents."

Having said which, Mr. Shrig lifted his stick and therewith gently tapped the sleepy driver, who chirrupped dismally to his woebegone animal, and the hackney-coach lumbered away through the rain, leaving Mr. Shrig staring after it, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle, a habit of his when busied upon some perplexing problem.

And yet he is not so lost in thought but that he is instantly aware Mr. Gillespie and Sir Nevil are ap-

proaching, and to notice that the baronet is remarkably agile and moves at a good pace in spite of his ugly limp.

The footman of the chariot has espied them also, for down he springs and has the door of the luxurious vehicle open, all in a moment.

"Where to, Officer?" demanded Sir Nevil, motioning Mr. Gillespie into the carriage.

"Why, sir, I'll ride outside along o' your two young men and——"

"On the contrary, you will ride inside and talk to me."

"Werry good, sir!" Hereupon Mr. Shrig gave the coachman all necessary directions and, obeying Sir Nevil's imperious gesture, got in and shut the door.

"Officer," said Sir Nevil as the carriage rolled smoothly over the cobbles, "I understand you specialise in cases of murder?"

"Vich, sir, I do not go for to deny."

"You are said to be remarkably astute."

"As-toot, sir?" repeated Mr. Shrig, pondering the word.

"You have captured a number of murderers in your time?"

"A tidy few, sir."

"By reason that you are so preternaturally astute!"

"As-toot?" repeated Mr. Shrig again, as though a little shy of the expression. "Maybe so, sir, or maybe because them as I appre'ended vas n't."

"Ha! D'you mean that murderers are generally fools, then?"

"Not by no manner o' means, sir; contrairiwise they're generally knowing cards and werry downy birds, re-markable downy, sir, ah, and the better ed-dicated the downier as a gen'ral rule . . . But then a murderer is ever and alvays a murderer and that's enough for me."

"How enough? Explain!"

"Why, sir," answered Mr. Shrig, shaking a placid head, "this here is vun o' them theer things as can't novise be explained. And, because why? Sir, I'll tell ye! Because no one can't explain a nat'ral gift or, as you might say, instink. And my gift or instink is spotting murderers . . . and the downier the better."

Sir Nevil laughed softly and leaned back against the deep cushions, his arms outstretched before him, his ungloved hands crossed upon the knob of his cane, and Mr. Shrig's glance, happening to rove thither, became suddenly fixed. The lamp, to be sure, gave but a dim, inconstant light, and yet as he gazed, Mr. Shrig became gradually aware that these slender hands, curved one above the other, were indefinably strange . . . inhuman . . . white claws to rend . . . the talons of a bird of prey! Was it in their shape? No! Their size? No! The length of the fingers? No! One finger? Yes! . . . The little finger, white, slender, and disproportionately long . . . Ay, that was it! . . . And Sir Nevil was speaking:

"But, unfortunately for you, my astute and gifted friend, to convict a man of any crime you must have more than mere instinct, you must produce proof positive!"

"Proof!" sighed Mr. Shrig mournfully. "You've said it, sir, Lord love ye, 't is proof as is the curse o' my perfession. I can spot you a cove red-'anded from the deed. I can appre'end or arrest you that cove,—werry good! But unless I can prove to twelve other coves as that cove done the deed, that cove can snap 'is fingers under my breezer and valk off a free man!"

"And very properly!" retorted Sir Nevil. "No one is guilty until proved so."

"True again, sir! There's many a guilty cove, as ought to be topped an' gibbeted, a-sluicing 'is ivories wi' blue-ruin in some boozin'-ken at this werry minute

and all along o' proof! Take, for instance, this here murder o' your misfort'nate young nevvy ——"

"Stop!" exclaimed Sir Nevil. "Are you so perfectly assured, so altogether satisfied and convinced that he was indeed murdered?"

"Ay, sir, I am so."

"But why are you so very certain, man?"

"From ewidences o' wi'lence on the body or, as you might say, the cadaver, sir. Murder it vas, most undoubted. Conseqvently somevheres in this here city o' London, or parts adjacent thereunto, is the murderer as done the deed — or caused it to be done, a-sittin' nice an' comfortable in social conwerse, p'r'aps. Now the question is: 'Ow find that man, and when found 'ow prove as he done the deed?"

"What of yourself, Mr. Shrig, a man so superlatively astute?"

"As-toot," sighed Mr. Shrig, shaking his head, "as-toot, as-tooter or as-tootest, this here case is goin' to take a powerful deal o' provin' . . . and yet . . . I dunno!"

"You think you see your way — so soon?"

"'Ardly that, sir, 'ardly that. Ye see it starts bad, for a body deskivered on the scene o' the crime may tell you a lot, but a body found adrift in the river may tell you — nothin' at all."

"It sounds hopelessly perplexing!"

"Vich it do indeed, sir! But, on the other 'and, there's some corpses as vill tell you things, werry helpful things, no matter where you finds 'em. And, sir, the corp' o' your unfort'nate nevvy is vun."

Here a momentary silence and then Mr. Gillespie spoke, his voice unnaturally high:

"Good God, Shrig! What d'ye mean?"

"Vell, sir, I told you, I think, as said corp' 'ad n't got much face left to speak on — must ha' got itself jammed between piles or summat, but the jaws is all

right and the teeth — werry fine, white teeth, too! And between said teeth . . . a shred o' cloth ——"

"Cloth?" exclaimed Mr. Gillespie in the same strained tone. "Cloth . . . how . . . what kind?"

"Welweteen, sir!" answered Mr. Shrig, peering from the window. "Now show me a cove in a torn welweteen jacket, a tall, strong man wi' werry large 'ands, and I'll show you the cove as ackcherlly done the deed!"

"And in London," sighed Sir Nevil, "in this vast city of London are tens of thousands of men in velveteen jackets and doubtless many of these jackets torn!"

"An' here," said Mr. Shrig, still peering out of the window, "here I must ax you to get down, or as you might say, a-light, sirs."

"Are we there?" demanded Sir Nevil.

"No, sir, but pretty near."

"Then why get down here?"

"Because we are vithin easy valkin' distance, sir."

"But why not drive on, man?"

"Because sir, these alleys is too narrer for anythin' bigger than a barrer!" So saying, Mr. Shrig pulled the check-string, whereupon the carriage stopped and the door was opened by a damp but deferential footman.

They descended into mud and a rain-filled gloom rendered more apparent by miserable oil lamps that, flickering dismally here and there, showed glimpses of a squalid street and a narrow alley into whose noisome dark Mr. Shrig led the way, his broad-brimmed hat drawn low upon his brow, the knobbed stick grasped in ready hand.

"Qvick's the vord, sirs!" quoth he, in hoarse whisper. "This ain't eggsackly an 'ealthy country for me — or you, sirs, so step lively and keep close!"

He led them through fetid passages between clammy walls, across pestiferous courts where the feet slipped and sank into loathsome mud, festering plots shut in

by miserable tenements — vile dens and hovels seldom visited by the cleanly sun — where Crime was bred and Vice born to languish wretchedly awhile and die; where Decency was not known and Shame fled appalled while Ignorance and Hunger stalked hand in hand.

Late though the hour yet the close air about them seemed full of the vague stir of teeming misery, a hushed, indefinable blur of sound pierced, ever and anon, by the desolate wail of a sleepless child . . . a discord of fierce voices . . . And sounds there were yet more evil.

At length these narrow labyrinthine ways opened out, in their nostrils breathed a sweeter, cleaner air and, turning a sudden corner they saw through the falling rain a shapeless, low-pitched building with a small window whence beamed a ray of light and beyond this a mist that was the river.

"Here we are, sirs!" said Mr. Shrig, pointing with his stick. "Yonder 's th' office an' Joe's light, and in the little shed beyond lays — It! The corp', Sir Nevil! The body o' your unfort'nate young nevvy! Mind your feet, sir! Tak' my arm, it 's a bit awk'ard going 'ereabouts ——"

"And a damnably dreary hole into the bargain!" added Mr. Gillespie.

"Dreary, sir?" demurred Mr. Shrig. "Why I 'll agree as it ain't eggsackly a cheery place of a rainy night, but — dreary? 'T is all in the p'int o' view, sir. I 've sat 'ere frequent of a summer's h'eve vatching the sunset an' puffin' my steamer merry as a grig!"

By this time they had reached the building and, opening a door, Mr. Shrig ushered them into a small, very neat room, where, perched at a desk on a high stool was a man writing busily, who, like the room, was himself very small and very neat; perceiving the strangers he laid down his quill and glanced up enquiringly.

"Vell, Joe, how goes it?" quoth Mr. Shrig.

"Fair to middlin', Jarsper," answered the small man in small, thin, wailing tones, "fair to middlin' except for me lumbager — deary me! Wot can I do for these gents? Is it the young 'ooman as vas towed ashore yesterday arternoon, Jarsper, because if it is ——"

"No, it ain't her, Joe, it's Number Two-'undred and Vun."

"V'y that 's 'im as come in this evenin' !"

"The werry same i-dentical, Joe! I vants to show these here gentlemen the ewidences o' i-dentification found on its pusson, Joe."

"O deary me!" wailed Joe, clambering down from his perch. "Werry good, Jarsper. My lumbager ketches me oncommon sharp when the weather's dampish . . . deary O Lor'! Here's the keys, Jarsper."

Keys in hand, Mr. Shrig crossed to a shallow cupboard that took up one side of the room and, opening the doors, disclosed to view long rows upon rows of pigeon-holes each bearing a number and each more or less filled with a heterogeneous collection of oddments; and though to be sure the majority of these articles seemed poor and tawdry, yet here and there among the jumble precious stones sparkled; also there was about these multifarious objects, so diverse in themselves, a wistful air, yet also something indefinably sordid and grim, insomuch that Sir Nevil, limping nearer, leaned to view them curiously through his quizzing-glass.

"These here, sir," explained Mr. Shrig, "is all objex found upon corpses as nobody ever troubled to claim. A rum lot, sir — precious few on 'em of any great walue . . . y'see, wallybles has a manner o' wanishing from corpses, and vich ain't to be vondered at I suppose, seeing as huming natur' is huming natur'! Though 'ere's a pearl brooch an' gold vedding-ring . . . Number eighty-four! Ay, to be sure, she vas a

lady . . . silk stockin's! But here's our partick'ler articles . . . Number Vun, a leather vallet wi' dockiments, warious. Number Two, a minnytoor of young voman in gold frame! Number Three, a gold vatch vith monnygram H. L. (a vonder it didn't wanish!). Number Four, a gold finger-ring (ditto). Number Five, a net purse containing fifteen guineas, no more and no less (ditto again!). And there y'are, sir!"

"To be sure, Gillespie, I know this ring!" sighed Sir Nevil. "I saw it gleam upon that brotherly hand which crippled me for life! . . . And this miniature? Ay, begad, she was a glorious creature in those days! You remember her, Gillespie? . . . Worth fighting for — eh? And I . . . lost her! Ah well, well — 'twas years ago! And now the wallet . . . these letters? Ay, 'tis dear brother Humphrey's untidy caligraphy! . . . Officer, a chair, pray! I must read 'em — every word."

Seated at a small table, Sir Nevil watched Mr. Shrig open the wallet in question and extract its contents, damp from their late immersion yet still legible.

"There's dockiments warious," quoth Shrig, handling the papers with tenderest solicitude. "First exhibit, a marriage licence. Second ditto, a birth stifficate. Third, a letter addressed to Captain the Honourable John Cholmondeley, R. N. — vich I places back in the vallet. Fourth — a letter addressed to Her Grace the Duchess o' Camberhurst — vich I likevise places back in said vallet. Fifth, a letter addressed to Sir Nevil Loring, Bart., vich I dooly 'ands to you, sir — an' there y'are!"

Sir Nevil perused letters and documents with minutest care, passing each in turn to Mr. Gillespie for that gentleman's inspection, while Mr. Shrig, watchful of eye, conversed in hoarse whispers with the plaintive Joe.

"Egad, Gillespie," exclaimed Sir Nevil, his reading

done, "'t is all here! These papers establish nephew David's identity beyond all cavil . . . armed with these he might have taken possession of Loring Chase and I — ah, well . . . Fate hath decreed otherwise, it seems!"

"And now, sirs," said Mr. Shrig, having counted and returned the papers to the wallet, "p'r'aps you von't care to take a peep at — It?"

"You mean?"

"The corp', sir."

"Assuredly!" answered Sir Nevil, rising.

Hereupon Mr. Shrig, having returned the wallet to its particular pigeon-hole and relocked the cupboard, took a lantern from a niche provided for it in an angle of the wall, lighted it at the fire, reached a ponderous key whence it dangled upon an especial hook and opening a small back-door peered out into a darkness full of the dismal sound of falling rain.

"Dampish, sirs, dampish!" said he. "But then It's a-layin' nice and 'andy — foller me."

So they follow him across an unevenly paved yard and halt where he halts before a small, desolate structure rendered more dreary by reason of the ceaseless dripping of the rain. Here Mr. Shrig seems to find some difficulty with the lock, but the key turns at last, the door opens, wailing dismally, and they step into a gloomy place, damply chill, whose roof and walls, pervious to the elements, admit cold airs that sigh and moan through chink and crevice, insomuch that Mr. Gillespie instinctively gathers his great-coat closer about him.

"Ay, 't is a bit draughty-like, sir!" Mr. Shrig admitted; "but then, d'ye see, them as lays here don't mind it . . . because v'y? Because they're beyond mindin' anything — vich is summat arter all if ye come to think on it. We've only vun here at present, but that vun is The Vun — It! And theer It lays — yonder!" And lifting the lantern, Mr. Shrig pointed to

a long, shapeless object mounted upon rough trestles and draped with discoloured sacking.

Now as they stared on this grim and formless thing, the shroud which veiled it stirred sluggishly in some current of air much as if invisible fingers were slyly, furtively plucking at it. Lantern in hand, Mr. Shrig crossed the uneven floor and, making as if to turn back the rough shroud, paused.

"Sirs," said he, "this here may ha' been a nice-lookin' young gent once, but 'e ain't 'ardly vot you'd go for to call pretty now——"

"Is murder ever pretty?" retorted Sir Nevil. "Come, why do you hesitate? My nerves are steady."

With slow, almost reverent gesture Mr. Shrig turned down the sacking; and beholding the mangled horror beneath, Mr. Gillespie shrank.

"Horrible — horrible!" he gasped. "Cover it up again — cover it in God's name!" And turning his back he retreated to the door and leaned there.

Not so Sir Nevil; here was no shrinking of that slight, elegant form, no change in these classically beautiful features, no quiver of shapely lip or nostril, no flicker of curling lash, no creeping pallor on this smooth, so strangely youthful cheek. For a long moment he gazed serenely down at this dead and mutilated thing, then — with movement altogether sudden and unexpected — stripped it of dingy covering until it lay exposed, from sodden, discoloured shirt-frill to up-pointing, sodden boots.

"Lord . . . sir!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, his usual placidity quite gone. "Lord love me——" Here, noticing the direction of Sir Nevil's keen gaze, he looked thither also . . . A clenched hand! A strong and shapely hand that, despite bruises and abrasions, seemed to have been well cared for in life; but now these white fingers with their carefully tended nails were fast shut in the iron rigor of death.

"Poor . . . youth!" said Sir Nevil at last. "Never having known him in life I could not love him . . . But now . . . in death . . . poor youth!"

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, covering the pitiful thing from sight. "Poor, misfort'nate young gent. But talkin' o'——"

"His burial shall be my care."

"Werry proper, sir, seeing as It is your nevvy! But talkin' o' nerves, sir——"

"When can he be removed?"

"Arter the inkvest, sir. And speakin' o'——"

"When will that be?"

"Pretty soon, I reckon, sir. And as for nerves, I don't believe as you 've got nary a vun, sir."

"I am not easily affected."

"And no error, sir!" nodded Mr. Shrig, as he ushered them out into the rain and so back to the neat room where the neat but doleful Joe sat crouched to his writing. Here, having extinguished the lantern and restored it to its neat shelf, Mr. Shrig buttoned up his coat, nodded to Joe and forthwith piloted his visitors back the way they had come.

Reaching the squalid street without molestation, Mr. Shrig stood to watch the gentlemen into the carriage whence Sir Nevil leaned suddenly to look down at Mr. Shrig in narrow-eyed scrutiny:

"You mentioned a shred of velveteen, I think?"

"Ay — what of it, sir?"

"I did not see it."

"It 'll be perjooced at the inkvest, sir."

"And in the meanwhile you will devote all your energies and astuteness to the matter, I trust?"

"Sich being my dooty, sir."

"Have you arrived at any conclusion — formulated any theory to work upon?"

"Oceans, sir! Lord, I've got plenty o' theories! It 's proving 'em as is my trouble. Proof, sir," sighed

Mr. Shrig, shaking doleful head, "proof is a owdacious tough customer 'owever you tackles 'im an' never more so than in this 'ere case o' your misfort'nate nevvy."

"But surely you do not despair so soon, Mr. Shrig of Bow Street?"

"Vich, sir, I 'd take leave to remind you as Jarsper Shrig is only a huming being after all! But then, sir, on the other 'and, 'ope, sir . . . capital H-O-P-E — 'ope, springs eternal in the huming breast. And conseqvently, sir, though Proof has gravelled me constant so far, I ain't throwed up the sponge yet, not by no manner o' means."

"I rejoice to hear it," answered Sir Nevil, his shapely mouth curving to a singularly winning smile, "and for your further encouragement — mark this! Find out the murderer of my nephew David Loring, prove his guilt before the world, and that same hour I pay you the sum of five hundred pounds . . . Good night!" Up went the window, the coachman cracked his whip and the ponderous travelling-chariot rolled smoothly away.

Mr. Shrig, standing to watch the carriage out of sight, took off his hat, wholly oblivious of the rain, and ran brawny fingers through his grizzled hair, his clean-shaven lips pursed in their soundless whistle. Then, clapping hat firmly upon his head, he took fresh grasp of his knotted stick and set off at sudden speed, hastening back through noisome court and narrow alley, his keen gaze now searching the gloom under foot, now the rain-filled darkness overhead, as one who sought in earth and heaven the answer to some enthralling enigma.

Reaching the neat office he nodded to Joe, relighted the lantern, took down massive key and, once more traversing the narrow yard, reopened creaking door and, key in fist, approached that still and awful shape.

Setting down the lantern he threw aside the sacking and, getting upon his knees, fell to work upon those locked fingers, using the key as a lever.

But the dead holds fast, and Mr. Shrig's forehead is damp ere he succeeds, and from the grasp of those stiffly clenched fingers wrests a small object that gleams in the light of the lantern; and small though it is, this object seems to fascinate Mr. Shrig, for he is still upon his knees staring at it gleaming upon his open palm when he is roused by the entrance of the plaintive Joe, who wails a perfunctory question:

"Wot now, Jarsper? O deary me, O Lor'! Fresh ewidence?"

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, "of a sort!"

"Well, Lor' lumme, it 's daylight an' time my 'relief' was 'ere to tak' over . . . Bob Denny, and 'e ain't come yet and me lumbager so bad an' all, O deary me——"

"Daylight is it, Joe? Then I 'll be toddling."

"Werry good, Jarsper. And if you should meet me 'relief', 'urry 'im up, will ye . . . an' me wi' me lumbager . . . so if you meet 'im, 'urry 'im up, dammim!"

The rain had ceased when Mr. Shrig stepped forth beneath a sky flushing to the dawn, whose ever-growing radiance slowly turned the sullen waters of the river to a waxing glory; and yet it could scarcely be this had set the glow upon Mr. Shrig's grim cheek, or the light in his keen eyes as he stood peering down thoughtfully at these rippling waters.

"Ah," quoth Mr. Shrig at last in murmurous apostrophe, "you know a precious lot, you do! You knows the How and the V'y and the V'ere of it all, you do! And v'at do I know now? Werry little! And yet, if I was to write it down I should spell H-O-P-E, 'ope vith a werry large capital H indeed!"

Having delivered himself of which, Mr. Shrig went his thoughtful way beside the river, his hands gripping the knobbed stick behind him, his head bowed and his lips pursed in their soundless whistle.

CHAPTER IV

Introduces a Very Sorry Hero

. . . Darkness and pain . . . a sense of growing helplessness and misery . . . a sick terror of past things! And yet he must remember . . . that was it — to remember — if the pain would only suffer him to think . . . What did he remember? . . . Drinking farewell with a vague someone who had been his friend . . . yes, one who had sought his acquaintance on the ship. Ah, to be sure he had voyaged on a ship! . . . He remembered also the drowsiness, the inexplicable heaviness that had crept upon him, numbing his faculties, robbing him of strength until he sank down and down into a black horror . . . nightmare . . . wherein he lay impotent yet dimly conscious of evil all about him . . . vague and awful terrors . . . He remembered a whirl of struggling forms . . . a scream suddenly and awfully hushed and thereafter a dreadful, shattering crash . . . silence and nothingness — stay! He recalled a sudden shock of icy water that waked him to passionate effort, a desperate struggling in the dark . . . mud . . . slimy timbers, an upward clambering sucked at by hungry waters . . . rats, they were all about him still, watching him bright-eyed from dingy nooks and corners . . . But who he was, and where, and who the friend had drunk with him — these were things beyond his memory, strive how he might . . . And his head was bursting! And the rats were everywhere . . . they were coming nearer! Well, there were horrors worse than rats . . . If he could only remember! His name, for instance — what was his name?

Who was he? . . . If only the throbbing in his head would abate a little then he might find an answer to these terrifying questions . . . Who? What? Where? Why? . . . Or perchance this was death; if so it was more awful than he had dreamed. . . .

Something touched him and a voice spoke, questioning:

"Wot ails ye, Jack?"

So his name was Jack, then! . . . And yet it had an unfamiliar sound—

"Wot 's y'r trouble, Jack?"

Hereupon, exerting his will, he opened his eyes and beheld a dim form looming over him.

"I am—hurt, I think . . . very sick, and my head is split open . . . I cannot remember who, or what, or where . . ."

"Sound lushy to me, ye do! Let 's 'ave a look at ye!"

Heavy footsteps that crossed the floor, the creak of a shutter, a light that blinded him.

"Ay, I thought as much!" growled the voice. "And a pretty objeck y'are! Out of this, ye lousy dog!"

A foot that spurned him even more fiercely until, once more calling upon his will, he contrived to get upon unsteady legs and totter out into the new day.

Haphazard he went, stumbling now and then, and often stopping to clasp throbbing temples.

So his name was Jack! . . . And yet . . . it seemed he had answered to another name once . . . and in a different world . . . And there had been a ship in it . . . and one who was his friend, a very merry fellow . . . And there had been a dinner . . . lights and wine . . . plenty of it . . . drowsiness . . . sickness and an engulfing darkness and in this darkness a growing mist . . . and then—faces . . . yes, a blur of faces dominated by one that flashed upon his vision

. . . grew suddenly large . . . loomed gigantic . . . grew suddenly small and smaller . . . to a pin point — vanished. And now his name was Jack! . . . And yet . . . if he could but remember — something . . . something! . . . there had been a shock — a thunderous crash that had shivered the universe about him! . . . And before this was the ship . . . and after the ship — darkness and horrible visions . . . And now? Now, before him was a shimmering gleam that looked like water . . . and he was faint, he must rest awhile . . . sick, he must lie down awhile, perhaps then the horror in his head would pass, the pain abate and allow him to think and thinking — to remember.

He was sitting, miserably huddled, his head between clasping hands again, his haggard eyes now upon the rotting planks of the causeway under foot, now upon those stealthy waters beyond, now uplift to the far distant heaven glorious with dawn. . . .

Who? What? Where? Why?

Desperately he strove to find answers to these haunting questions, to order the wild chaos of his thoughts, to force his memory back — back beyond that stupendous, reverberating crash that had so annihilated his world, snapped the link between past and present.

Thus crouched he, a windless dawn about him, an awesome quietude broken only by the murmurous ripple of the flowing tide, a sound very pleasant and soothing at first, yet which gradually changed to something persistent and worrying . . . a querulous voice — questioning . . . questioning "Who was he? What was he? Where and how and why?"

Now after some while as he hearkened to this voice, so small yet imperious, so soft yet insistent, he became aware of approaching footsteps — slow, dragging footsteps — and, glancing up wearily, espied a man who walked beside the river chin on breast as one in thought, a shortish, powerfully built person whose shaven lips

were pursed in a soundless whistle; a placid philosopher in top-boots pondering the mutability of human affairs, or a poet, with knobbed stick beneath his arm, seeking inspiration for an ode to "Morning"; howbeit, a very thoughtful person so lost in self-communion as to appear unconscious of his surroundings and wholly unaware of the two formidable shapes that dogged him, creeping ever nearer upon his heels, ragged, fierce-eyed creatures whose every look and gesture was a menace.

Well, to be sure, this placid dreamer must be warned. To the which end our solitary watcher strove to rise, but made such a labour of it, what with blinding pain and trembling limbs, that it seemed he was too late . . . A sudden, stealthy rush, a wild-beast leap and the two had reached their victim. . . . The whirl of a murderous bludgeon . . . and caught by that coward stroke, the philosopher threw out his arms, staggered and fell. But our solitary was upon his feet at last and stumbling to the rescue, crying he knew not what; whereupon the two, crouching above their prey, snarled a fierce answer, like the wild beasts they were, and turned at bay, yellow fangs a-gleam, but — beholding what fashion of thing their assailant was, they uttered a yelp, a howl, and made off without staying the onset.

Left thus master of the situation, our solitary stood swaying a little, staring down at the prostrate man who presently stirred, sneezed, and raising himself to a sitting posture, removed his crumpled hat from his head with a vigorous jerk and sat up to survey the ominous dent in its shaggy crown with an air of grave yet placid interest.

"A werry determinated effort!" he remarked at last, "a dent as would hold my fist — but an 'ammer will put that right! But Lord, it must ha' took a amazin' amount o' windictiveness to make a dent like this here in a castor lined wi' steel . . . vich is a

inwention o' my own agin' such — Lord! . . . Lord love my eyes!" he broke off as, glancing up, he beheld the face and form of his deliverer.

"Are you . . . much hurt?" enquired this person in strangely halting, muffled tones.

"'Urt — no . . . but ——" exclaimed Mr. Shrig scrambling nimbly to his feet, "Lord — vot's wrong wi' you?"

"Much!" answered the other, faintly. "Everything! I . . . cannot think . . . I cannot remember, I — am sick!"

"And no error!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "But vot's wrong wi' you?"

"I don't know ——"

"You — by Goles, you look like a walking stiff — a 'found drowned' — a corp' as has jest crawled out of its grave — ah, an' a precious muddy grave at that!"

"I feel . . . like one . . . dead ——"

"Here, take a peep at yourself!" And from one of his numerous pockets Mr. Shrig drew a small circular mirror, polished it on coat-cuff and gave it into the other's shaking fingers.

"You don't think I . . . am dead . . . do you? . . . I feel . . . very dead."

"You look more like a case o' Windictiveness with a capital Wee! Lord, Windictiveness seems oncommon busy this morning. . . . Who are ye, pal — vot's your monicker — your name?"

"I . . . don't know ——"

"Eh — don't know?"

"I can't remember . . . the man called me 'Jack' . . . "

"Jack what?"

"Only Jack — but . . . he was wrong . . . I don't think I have a name . . . I can't think or . . . remember."

"Vell then, take a peep at your chevy, pal," said

Mr. Shrig, extending the small mirror. The Nameless One obeyed and saw a reflection of eyes that glared from a mask of mire and blood, a flaccid mouth, parted lips that showed a gleam of strong, white teeth.

"I look . . . very dead . . . don't I?"

"You've been in the river!" quoth Mr. Shrig, pocketing the mirror and viewing the dreadful shape before him with keen and speculative eyes. "In the river, pal, and — not so long ago, either!"

"The river? . . . Yes — it must have been the river, I guess!"

"And how did ye come in the river, pal?"

"I . . . don't know, I — can't remember . . . My head burst open when the crash came and I . . . haven't been able to think since . . . my head burst . . ."

"Burst, pal? D'ye mean a crack o' the nob? Love me, but here's blood enough! Stoop down and lemme take a peep . . . What, are ye faint, pal? Hold up, lad — so! Easy does it — sit ye down. Now, let 's 'ave a look — keep still! Ay, here 's Windictiveness wrote werry big!"

"Can you see . . . my brains?"

"No, no, it ain't so bad as that, pal, though I'll allow it ain't pretty. Who 's been and give you this here almighty perishing crack?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Howsomever, you saved my life, or good as, from them two — Creepin' Sam and Soldier Ben, they vas, I twigged 'em as I lay — and I'm grateful, pal, grateful. Gratitood is vun o' the strongest p'ints o' my character. Can you valk?"

"No!"

"An' small vonder!"

"Oh . . . I think . . . I'm dying . . ."

"Not you, pal, not you ——" But here, as if to prove his words, the Nameless One sagged back across

Mr. Shrig's supporting arm, with head swung loosely back at horrid angle; whereupon Mr. Shrig laid him gently down and glanced round about him helplessly.

"Here's an almighty rum go!" he exclaimed to the circumambient air; then, catching up his battered hat, he hasted to fill it from the river and whipping off his belcher neckerchief, fell upon his knees and began to bathe the blood and grime from the sufferer's face and hair.

A young, handsome face with regular features delicately moulded but ghastly in its pallor and the gleam of uprolled eyes beneath their long, drooping lashes.

"Now this," quoth Mr. Shrig, "this is a reg'lar almighty perishing everlasting rum——" here he checked both word and breath together, for by chance his roving gaze had lighted upon the sufferer's hand, which seemed to possess some strange and potent fascination for Mr. Shrig, whose eyes grew very round, while his lips slowly pursed themselves in their soundless whistle. Presently, however, he roused himself, and drawing a flask from some recess of his bulky clothes, he unscrewed the cap and endeavoured to force some of the spirit between these white, fast-clenched teeth; in the which act he was conscious of heavy footfalls, and glancing up, espied a bony man approaching whom he hailed forthwith by the name of Bob.

"Wot's the racket, Jarsper?" enquired the bony Bob approaching. "'Oo 'ave ye got this time? My eye, you've been a-layin' into 'im proper by 'is looks! Ain't killed 'im, 'ave ye?"

"Stow y'r chaffer, Bob, an' gi'e's a hand wi' this unfort'nate pal o' mine."

"Pal o' yourn, Jarsper?"

"Ay! Ketch 'olt of 'is stampers — and easy does it!"

"Why, I'm in a 'urry, Jarsper . . . got to take over from Joe and I'm late a'ready! I'll tell Joe to roll along wi' the barrer——"

"You 'll 'elp me get my pal into an 'ackney-coach this werry minute——"

"It 's a coffin 'e wants — by 'is looks! And wheer will us find a 'ackney-coach at this time in the mornin'?"

"I knows where, Bob! Now do you 'elp me or must I per-suade ye to do it vith my baster?" And Mr. Shrig caught up his knobbed stick.

"Looks as if 'e 'd 'opped the twig for good an' all, Jarsper, but if 'e 's your pal——"

"'E is!" nodded Mr. Shrig with unwonted vehemence. "Ah, an' vot 's more . . . never you mind. Now, up vith him . . . easy does it! And tread gentle, Bob, gentle and both together, Bob."

CHAPTER V

Concerning the Troubles of One Corporal Richard Roe of "The Gun" Inn

A fortnight has elapsed and Corporal Richard Roe, sitting in the snug bar-parlour of that small and cosy tavern known as "The Gun", and situated in Gray's Inn Lane, lifted the shining hook which replaced his left hand to stroke the tuft of neatly trimmed whisker which adorned that side of his comely, good-natured face, what time he gazed apprehensively at the rows of figures whose ragged columns straggled over the sheet of paper before him. For Corporal Richard was about to cast up his weekly accounts, a desperate and laborious business entailing an infinitude of painful mental stress, time, ink and paper.

Thus the Corporal eyed the accounts before him with looks of mingled trepidation and abhorrence; but, duty being duty, he groaned, squared mighty shoulders and grasping quill pen, much as if it had been a weapon of offence, resolutely set to work, adding the items before him aloud, thus:

"A farden, two ha'pennies and four fardens is a farden — and carry tuppence. And tuppence and tenpence-farden is ought pence, a farden — and carry a shilling. And nineteen shillings and sixpence comes to ought shillings, one pound, sixpence and a farden. Halt — stand easy!" Here was silence while the Corporal duly set down the total thus arrived at, dropped a blot, smeared it with his finger, sighed dismally and continued:

"Ought shillings, one pound, sixpence and a farden added to thirteen pound, three shillings and five pence

three fardens come to — ay, that's the question — what?"

The Corporal groaned, took a fresh dip of ink, dropped another blot, smeared it over with his little finger, drew a deep breath, and continued:

"As you were! Three fardens and a farden is four fardens — a penny, and a penny and fivepence is sixpence, and sixpence and sixpence is another shilling, and a shilling to three shillings is four, and four to ought shillings is still four shillings ——"

From the narrow doorway at the Corporal's elbow a head suddenly protruded, a close-cropped head swathed about in white bandages.

"Can I help you, Corporal Dick?"

The voice was soft and almost timid in its pleading, yet the Corporal instantly dropped another blot, sighed at it, shook his comely head at it, smeared it with his finger and lifting his kindly blue eyes towards the speaker, nodded.

"Lord, Jack, you're allus a-helping of me — pewter and glass, comrade, platters and dishes, broom, duster or scrubbing-brush, you're allus at it, morning, noon and night — it ain't right, comrade, it ain't right. You don't leave me anything to do except serve the customers. You work too 'ard, Jack . . . and you're still on the sick-list ——"

"But I like to work — I love it, indeed . . . indeed I do! It keeps me from trying to think — trying to . . . remember."

"But we want ye to remember, comrade — leastways, my pal Jarsper does . . . wants ye to remember how you come into the river with your 'ead all cut open . . . wants ye to remember your name — all about yourself, d'ye see, Jack."

The slender brows beneath the bandages wrinkled themselves painfully, the eyes closed, the head swayed itself to and fro in pitifully helpless fashion.

"I can't . . . I can't! I have tried day and night, but I . . . can't! I can't think backwards! . . . There was a dreadful crash . . . and I can't think beyond it . . . so don't — don't ask me ——"

"Very good, Jack, we'll let it wait 'till you're well and strong again. So don't ye worry, comrade — stand easy. Sit ye down and smoke a pipe or take a drop o' summat comfortin' ——"

"No — no, thank you, only pray let me help you with those figures."

"What, can you cypher, lad?"

"I could once . . . I can now, I guess . . . please, please let me try!"

"With all my heart, comrade!" answered the Corporal with alacrity, and rising forthwith, reached a new pipe from the rack above the mantel, filled, lighted it and seating himself on the opposite side of the small table, watched his companion's rapid calculations and neat figuring with looks of ever-growing wonder and respect:

"Lord love me, comrade," he exclaimed suddenly, "the way you tackle them fardens is a-mazing!"

"How so?" enquired the other, a little anxiously.

"Why, you make no more of 'em than the 'Heavies' did o' they French Cuirassiers at Waterloo! You go at 'em, and through 'em, and over 'em and send 'em to the right-about!"

Here was silence again wherein the Corporal puffed and watched in unabated wonder until at last his companion laid down the pen, sighing regretfully.

"Have you any more accounts I can cast for you — please?" he enquired with tremulous eagerness.

"What, are ye done, comrade . . . so soon? Astonishing! And, strike me everlasting blue, not a single blot!"

"Have you nothing more, Corporal Dick? No letters to write?"

"Nary a one, comrade. But don't you worrit! Sit still and let's be sociable and talk like comrades should."

"Why, then, don't — please don't ask me to remember . . . It frightens me . . . it hurts my head to think back."

"Very good, lad, let's talk of ourselves! Here's you an' me ought to be true friends and comrades, because, d'ye see, you've been in the river and I've been in the river, and Jarsper Shrig saved your life same as 'e saved my life — so us must ever be true comrades to Jarsper likewise, you and me."

"Yes — yes indeed, Corporal . . . and he saved you too?"

"Ay, he did so. Ye see, Jack, when I lost this hand o' mine at Waterloo, so soon as I come out o' 'ospital they give me my discharge . . . they didn't want me no more . . . a one-'anded soldier ain't much good, d'ye see. But I 'adn't got no friends, Jack, nor family . . . and I felt there weren't no place in this busy world for a chap wi' only one 'and. So one night — it was raining, I remember — one night, Jack, I went down to the river minded to end it all . . . but Jarsper 'ad been watching me . . . and Jarsper followed me and seeing what I was about, grappled me bold as a lion for all my size, and the end of it was — in we went . . . down and down together. And then, of course, finding Jarsper couldn't swim, I 'ad to get 'im out again — which I did, and . . . well, here I am to-day alive and well — thanks to my comrade Jarsper!"

"So you saved each other, Corporal?"

"Why, I suppose we did — in a way. Though Jarsper saved me first . . . and arterwards. A' uncommon good friend is my comrade Jarsper, with a heart as big as St. Paul's."

"He has been very kind to me!"

"And he's doo back to-night, though to be sure 't is a goodish march from Gray's Inn Lane to Sussex . . ."

"Sussex!"

The word rang full and clear, in such startling contrast to the speaker's usual diffident utterance that the Corporal started, for the name might have been uttered by an altogether different man; and for a moment Corporal Richard seemed to behold such a man, one indeed who stood with head aloft and shoulders squared, whose very form seemed to dilate, who looked back at him with eyes wide and bright; then, even as the Corporal stared his amazement, these eyes dulled, wavered, were abased, the dark brows knit painfully, the proud head dropped, the shoulders sagged and the man was lost again in the timid, shrinking creature he had been.

"What, Jack lad — what, comrade, d'ye know Sussex, then?"

"I . . . I thought so . . . for a moment, but now I . . . don't know . . . I can't remember."

"Try lad, try! Here, let's write it down on this bit o' paper . . . S-U-S-E-X — so! Now, don't that help you none?"

"No!" answered his companion, "No — ah, no!" And crouching above the table he buried his face between writhing fingers.

"Poor lad!" sighed the Corporal, comforting hand upon the drooping shoulder. "Poor young chap! There now . . . don't worrit your 'ead about it, comrade."

"If only I could think back beyond the crash!"

"Why, never mind, comrade! Lemme fill you a pipe and we'll sit quiet and sociable . . . nothing like 'bacca, comrade, for ——"

"O, Corporal Dick," piped a voice from near at hand, "O, Corporal — if ye please, sir!"

The Corporal rose and, stepping into the small tap-room, beheld a gaunt woman whose bony arms dripped soap-suds; at sight of whose weary face he thrust hand into breeches pocket, but she stayed him with a gesture:

"No — no, Corporal Dick," quoth she, bobbing him a curtsey, "thankin' you kindly but me rent's paid, thank Gawd, an' I got plenty o' work this week! But my little Johnny's fell down and 'urted hisself an' is a-bellerin' fit to break your 'eart, pore lamb . . . won't be comforted no'ow, wants your young man, 'e do. So please, Corporal Dick, may your young man step acrorst the lane an' tell my little Johnny about Cinderyelly? Wonderful way wi' childer' your young man 'as to be sure! An' my little lamb's a-bellerin' so pitiful as I can't get on wi' me washin' — so if your young man'll be so obleeging as to step acrorst I'd be that grateful I can't say!"

"Why, I'll ask him, Mrs. Bascombe," answered the Corporal, dubiously, "though my young man ain't feeling particular bobbish this evening, mam, but ——"

"I'll come . . . yes, yes, I'll come, of course!" said the young man in question, stepping eagerly forward, "I love children, they . . . keep me from trying to remember . . . yes, yes I'll come, mam."

So the young man presently stepped across Gray's Inn Lane with the weary, distracted mother and very soon was seated in an atmosphere of steam and soap-suds with a very small and somewhat grimy urchin on his knee who stared up round-eyed into the face bent above him, a face so altogether gentle because so vastly wise in childish sorrows that the small urchin, nestling close, swallowed his sobs, dried his tears and forgot his griefs while the soft voice recounted the dire perils of Jack the Giant-Killer, of Puss-in-Boots and Red Riding Hood, until even the haggard woman must pause in her labours now and then to hearken, her aching weariness forgotten awhile.

CHAPTER VI

A Discourse on the Vun and Only

Mr. Shrig, seated in the cosy parlour of "The Gun", with his dusty boots upon the gleaming fender, his hat and great-coat upon their accustomed peg, raised the steaming glass to his lips, sipped, tasted and sighed.

"All correct, Jarsper?" enquired the Corporal.

"As ever, Dick — ek'alled by few and excelled by none."

"And how 's the country looking, Jarsper?"

"Green, Dick, vith birds a-vistlin' an' lambs a-friskin', but . . . gimme London, an' for true comfort this here 'Gun' of ourn ——"

"Yourn, Jarsper!"

"Ourn, Dick."

Here they smoked in silence awhile, both staring pertinaciously at the small though cheery fire.

"Any luck, Jarsper?" questioned the Corporal at last.

"Middlin', Dick, though nothin' to boast on."

"And the — clue, Jarsper?"

"A-vaitin' for the occasion or, as you might say, the opportoonity, Dick."

"And when will that be?"

"V'y, Dick, I'll tell ye — I dunno!"

"Ha!" quoth the Corporal, and they puffed together in thoughtful silence again.

"And how might our inwalid be gettin' along?" Mr. Shrig enquired at last.

"Better, Jarsper, and a' oncommon likeable chap 'e is — though over timid-like."

"And a gentleman — a nob, eh, Dick?"

"True blue!" nodded the Corporal. "And very friendly except when 'e goes dazed-like."

"That there crack 'e got on the tibby vas enough to daze a' elephant, Dick!"

"I believe you, Jarsper."

"Any marks on 'is clo'es — ha' you found anythin'?"

"Nothing at all, Jarsper!"

"And 'e don't remember nothin' about himself yet, Dick?"

"Nary a thing, Jarsper! And when I question him 'e wrinkles up 'is forr'id and stares like — ah, like a child as has lost itself — so troubled, Jarsper, and frightened-like, poor chap. But 'e 's a wonder to work! Broom or scrubbin'-brush . . . allus a-scrubbin' or a-scourin' or a-polishin' summat or other, I can't keep him from it! And as for cypherin' — Lord, Jarsper, 'e added up my week's accounts an' all so easy an' amazin' quick — so neat, Jarsper — not a blot, damme, not one!"

"But still 'e don't remember nothing about anything, eh, Dick?"

"Why, no, Jarsper, no — and yet I won't be sure ——"

"Not sure, Dick — eh?" Mr. Shrig's keen gaze flitted from the hearth to the top button of the Corporal's sleeved waistcoat and hovered there. "Not sure — eh, Dick?" he repeated.

"Well, d'ye see, I 'appened to mention the word 'Sussex,' Jarsper."

"The vord 'Sussex'!" nodded Mr. Shrig, "Ay, Dick — an' then?"

"Why, then 'e jumped as if 'e 'd been shot, Jarsper!"

"Jumped, did 'e, Dick?"

"Ay, and — 'Sussex' says 'e, very bold an' sharp-

like, 'Sussex,' says 'e, and stands up straight as a guardsman."

"Bold an' sharp-like, eh, Dick — an' then?"

"Why, then 'e wrinkled up 'is forr'id, shakes 'is 'ead, covers 'is face and moans about not being able to remember ——"

"An' all by reason o' you namin' the vord 'Sussex'?"

"Ay!" nodded the Corporal. "Which was strange."

"Sussex!" repeated Mr. Shrig, his gaze now upon the ceiling, "Sussex — hum!"

"Jarsper, what do you think about it?"

"V'y, Dick, I 'll tell ye — I raythor think I hear our inwalid a-comin' down the passage!"

Even as he spoke the door opened and the Nameless One entered and, seeing Mr. Shrig, paused suddenly with that timid, shrinking air peculiar to him. Young he was and wide in the shoulder, long-limbed, slender and formed for speed; but these shoulders slouched awkwardly, the supple back was bowed, the feet shuffled and the long, white fingers writhed and plucked nervously, while the dark brows knit themselves above dull eyes that peered. Noting all of which in a single glance, Mr. Shrig rose and welcomed him heartily, though the hand he laid on this drooping shoulder was surprisingly gentle:

"Well, pal," quoth he, "how goes it?"

"Thank you, I . . . don't know."

"Then how d'ye find yourself to-night, friend?"

"I — I don't . . . I can't find myself . . . I never shall!" answered the other with look and tone so hopeless that Mr. Shrig shook his head:

"Lord, never say die, pal! You 'll find yourself sure an' sartin vun o' these days. And here 's me an' Corporal Dick as is your friends, come, sit ye down, pal, 'ere by the fire vith a drop o' the Vun an' Only — let 's be comfortable."

"Thank you but . . . I'd rather not . . ."

"Eh — v'y so, pal?"

"Because you may question me . . . ask me to remember, and when I try . . . it hurts . . . I grow frightened. So, if you'll allow, I'd rather go and work . . . there are some glasses and tankards to be washed and ——"

"No, no, pal, no more vork to-night! Sit ye down by the fire — so! An' as for qvestions, Lord love ye, I won't ax you nothin' at all — scrag me if I do! Now look'ee, here's Corporal Dick tells me you're amazin' smart at figgerin', or as you might say, cypherin' accounts an' sich — pounds, shillings, pence an' fardens, they come easy to you — vich they don't to the Corporal — eh Dick?"

"Not by no manner o' means!" nodded the Corporal through a cloud of tobacco-smoke.

"Contrarywise, castin' up accounts is bonce to you — comes to you as nat'ral, shall ve say, as milk to a ninfant — you're a glutton for figures — eh?"

"They keep me from trying . . . to remember."

"Werry good! But look'ee, if you take over the accounts us'll 'ave to pay you a reg'lar veekly vage — agreed, Dick?"

"Agreed it is, an' heartily, Jarsper!"

"No, no!" cried the other, cowering down in his chair. "Don't give me money . . . I don't wish to be paid . . . I want no money . . ."

"Lord love me!" ejaculated Mr. Shrig, blinking.

"I hate money!"

"By Goles!" murmured Mr. Shrig, "your sentiments is rum, pal, remarkable rum!"

"So please don't pay me . . . what should I do with money?"

"Vell, you might spend it, pal, or keep it, or give it away ——"

"Thank you — thank you, I . . . am better without

it. Money brings trouble and pain, and . . . dark evils . . ."

"Vich I'll not wentur' to deny, pal. An' yet money 's a nevil as all folks is most oncommon eager to curse 'emselves vith. Aye, Money, Vomen, and Windictiveness, or, as you might say, Wengeance, is the motive for all the murders as ever vas commit! An' talkin' o' murder, Dick, brings me back to the country."

"Eh?" exclaimed the Corporal, staring.

"So nice an' green, Dick, vith birds a-vistlin' an' lambs a-friskin' so innocent 't would warm your 'eart! An' vhat partic'lar part o' the country, says you? A rare pretty part, says I, vith 'ills, Dick, soft, green 'ills as go up an' up, though they calls 'em 'Downs', Dick — though 'ow an 'up' can be a 'down' beats me! Hows'ever, Downs they be! And whereabouts, says you?" continued Mr. Shrig, stooping to shake the ashes from his pipe-bowl, but with his keen gaze flitting towards the huddled form in the chimney-corner, "V'ere are these 'downs' as is 'ups' vith larks a-carollin' so j'yful, says you? In Sussex! says I — ah, does your pore 'ead bother you, pal?" he questioned suddenly, for the crouching form had crouched lower with head between clasping hands, while from his quivering lips issued a groaning whisper:

"Sussex!"

"V'at is it, pal?"

"Nothing — nothing . . . only, for a moment, I thought . . . it seemed . . . but I cannot . . . cannot remember."

"Then don't try, lad, don't try!" said Mr. Shrig, patting the writhing shoulder gently. "V'at vas I sayin', Dick? Ah, I remember — Sussex vas the vord! And v'at, says you, v'at should take you into Sussex? Murder, says I! Murder, Dick, an' all along o' money, says I! V'at but the murder o' this here pore young gen'leman, Sir David Loring ——"

"David . . . Loring!"

The chair went over with a crash and the Nameless One was upon his feet, staring on Mr. Shrig wide-eyed, his bandaged head up-flung, and with pallid face, like drooping form, utterly transfigured:

"David . . . Loring?"

The flushed cheek, the quivering nostril, the dilating eye were eloquent for the moment, then — the long arms were wildly out-flung, the writhing hands clutched desperately at the empty air . . . the head sank, the futile hands wavered aimlessly, were clasped above the staring eyes and a groan burst from him:

"O God — O God . . . I can't — I can't . . . remember!" and sinking back into the chair the miserable, crouching form was shaken and convulsed by great gasping sobs. Then Mr. Shrig's arm was about him, and Mr. Shrig's glass at his lips.

"Drink this, lad — drink!" he commanded; now beholding Mr. Shrig's face at this moment, the Corporal's pipe slipped from his fingers and shivered upon the floor all unheeded.

"How are ye now, pal?"

"Thank you . . . very well — I think . . ."

"You seemed a bit — shook!"

"It was nothing . . . only it seemed as if . . . a curtain lifted — just for a moment . . . I can't explain . . ."

"You thought you reckernized the name — David Loring — p'r'aps?"

"No . . . yes — I don't know . . . I can't remember . . ."

"Why, it ain't a name to be easy forgot — David Loring . . . bein' the name of a young gent, heir to a great fortun' as took ship from Virginny in America for Loring Chase, vich is a fine, large house in Sussex, vich is vun o' the Southerly counties of England . . . David Loring o' Charlestown, Virginny, as started

for Loring Chase, Sussex, England and — never got there . . . Think!"

Hands that clutched bandaged head, staring eyes beneath puckered brows — brows that grew wet beneath these clasping, pallid hands compressed in fierce and desperate thought . . . a grim and pregnant silence . . . a breathless stillness broken suddenly at last by a wail of childish petulance:

"I can't . . . I can't! Don't ask me . . . it hurts! I think, if you'll excuse me I . . . I'll go to bed!"

"And a werry good place, too!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "So tip us your daddle, and good-night, pal — sleep sound!" So saying Mr. Shrig grasped those lax fingers, wrung them in hearty grasp and, opening the door, stood to watch that drooping, shambling form until a turn in the narrow passage hid it from view.

"Poor young chap!" exclaimed the Corporal, as the shuffling feet went stumbling uncertainly up the steep stairs. "What d'ye make of 'im, Jarsper?"

"Dick," answered Mr. Shrig, reaching a glowing coal from the fire wherewith to relight his pipe, "if I could tell you I should sap-rise you! Ah, if I vas to lay afore you my de-ductions I should as-tonish you! But not being easy wi' my proofs, dammem, I thinks an' says nothin', not a vord, Dick — only this: v'en a murder is commit, I ax myself this qvestion: who benefits — v'at vas the motive, Dick — werry good! But, damme, Dick, jest as I'm a-buildin' up a werry bee-utiful case agin — Mr. Nevermindoo and 'opin' to clap my daddles on 'im afore 'e — as you might say — 'ops the tvig, my 'opes is shattered most crool and I'm flummergasted, Dick, reg'lar conflummoxed and conflummerated and my bee-utiful case is novheres . . . An' all along o' big little-fingers as should be little! An' there y'are, Dick!"

"Why, Jarsper," said the Corporal, rubbing neat whisker with shining hook and shaking his comely head,

"I don't eggsactly twig your meaning . . . I don't tumble, comrade!"

"No more I thought you vould, Dick . . . An' now, pal, v'at d'ye say to jest vun more sip o' your Vun an' Only afore ve go to roost?"

CHAPTER VII

In Which Our Hero Sets Forth on a Journey

"Loring Chase, Sussex!"

He was sitting, crouched upon his bed, staring wide-eyed upon the dark. Mr. Shrig and the Corporal had tramped upstairs long ago; a distant clock chimed midnight.

"Loring Chase, Sussex!"

Amid the chaos of shattered thoughts, the nightmare terrors that clouded his mind, the sickening agony of his ever-futile efforts to recall the past, these words stood forth, stirring dim memories of another world, of hopes, ambitions . . . a different self. Who had he been and what? How came he thus lost in the terrible dark where indefinable horrors lurked?

The distant clock struck one, and two, and three; the narrow casement above him glimmered to a pallid dawn. Sighing, he lifted weary head and, rising at last, crept to the window and peered out upon a misty world of tiled roofs and crooked chimneys that rose, phantom-like, shrouded in billowing mists.

"Loring Chase, Sussex!"

Suddenly the crouching form grew more erect, the dulled eyes lightened: "Loring Chase, Sussex!" Could he but reach such a place there perhaps he might find the answer to these torturing questions. . . . Could he but reach such a place.

Creeping to the door he opened it stealthily and stood listening intently; from somewhere adjacent rose a long-drawn snore somewhat muted by bedclothes. Slowly and with infinite caution he crossed the small

landing and began to descend the narrow stair, pausing breathless at every creak of the ancient timbering, but heard only the throbbing of his own heart and the muffled snoring above. Thus at length he reached the street-door and, gently loosing bolt and chain, stepped out into a dawn full of chilling mist. Having softly reclosed the door, he glanced fearfully up and around, then hurried away heedless of direction, hastening on and on through desolate streets until, turning a sharp corner, he stopped and shrank back fearfully at sight of a great-coated watchman slumbering noisily in his box, but who, rousing suddenly, sat up to stare and scowl:

"Now then — now then!" he growled. "V'ere might you be off to so perishin' early an' all?"

"Will you please tell me the way to . . . Loring Chase, Sussex?"

"Sussex!" exclaimed the watchman, scowling fiercer. "Sussex, is it — yah, don't come gammonin' me wi' y'r Sussex's so perishin' early in the mornin' an' all!" And rising, he began to swing his arms and stamp his feet to restore circulation, what time he eyed his questioner with deepening suspicion:

"V'at ha' you been a-doin' of . . . vith your 'ead all bound up an' all? Hey?"

"I was hurt."

"Oo by? 'Ow?"

"I . . . don't remember."

"O! An' v'ere's your 'at?"

"I . . . don't know!"

"V'ere did ye steal them gen'leman's clo'es an' all? Hey?"

"They are my own . . . I guess . . . But pray tell me the way to Sussex ——"

"Sussex!" repeated the watchman with a snort of contempt. "Me eye an' Betty Martin! Sussex, says you? Hookey Valker says I — yah, Valker!"

"Thank you, but which way must I walk——"

"'Ere an' theer! Up an' down! Foller y'r nose! Yah, you can't gammon me wi' your Sussex an' all!"

At this the humble questioner, troubled and sorely puzzled, sighed, wrinkled his brows and went his solitary way. All about him lay a wilderness of empty streets where London's teeming multitudes slumbered; and yet even at this early hour was a hushed, never-ending clamour of traffic upon cobbled ways where country wains and waggons trundled heavily marketwards.

Slowly the great city began to awake; from a myriad chimneys smoke curled lazily against the brightening sky; doors opened; the erstwhile empty streets began to echo with the tread of feet, the tramp of horses and the grind of wheels, few at first but of ever-growing numbers, more and more, until the pavements rang to the tramp of an innumerable host and the passage of multitudinous vehicles, and the mighty city was broad awake at last, and roaring; for these trampling feet hurrying hither and thither, the grind and rattle of wheels upon cobbled thoroughfares, the ring of horses' hoofs, the shouts and cries of their drivers, these of themselves made up a continuous roar that was the voice of mighty London Town. And, dazed and deafened by it all, jostled by these hurrying throngs, yet heeded by none, crept the hero of this narrative — a pitiful, shrinking creature and eminently unheroic.

Such people of whom he ventured to ask his way either stared, shook their heads, scowled, or (what was worse) laughed and mocked at him; a perspiring ticket-porter it was who eventually directed his shuffling progress southeasterly. So came he at last to London Bridge and paused to lean, and stare down upon the dark and hungry waters of the river, viewing that sullen tide with a vague horror.

Now, as he stared down thus, conscious of nothing but these dismal waters and the sick terrors they

evoked, a hand grasped his arm, and glancing round, he beheld a woman clad in shabby, threadbare garments, who gazed upon him with a fearful apprehension in her eyes:

"Don't look at it!" she whispered: "Don't look at it or it 'll get you same as it 's got others . . . same as it near got me! So don't 'ee look at it, young man! Things is never quite s' bad as they seems — I know, for things is bad wi' me — ah, worse'n bad . . . all the best o' me took an' died — long ago . . . but I did n't go that road for my mother's sake! Lives down in the country, she do . . . thinks I 'm better off than when I left her to run away to London — London . . . O God — 'ow I 'ate it!"

"Then why not go back?" he questioned gently. "Why not go — back to the country?"

"Because I can't . . . I dare n't — never again! London 's got me an' won't let me go . . . never again . . . it 's — got me!"

"Like the ravening beast it is!" he answered. "Hark to it roaring!"

"What d'ye mean, young man?"

"The voice of the Beast!"

At this she looked at him with troubled eyes and shook her head.

"'Ows'ever, don't 'ee go starin' at the river!" she repeated. "Don't 'ee, or 't will get ye — same as it nigh got me once . . . and will in the end — p'r'aps! Go away, young man, get away while ye may."

"Yes," said he, "yes, I am going to Sussex."

Now at this she cried the word beneath her breath and burst into a passion of weeping, hiding her face in her thin shawl.

"Why — O, why do you weep?" he questioned distressfully.

"Only because I was born — in Sussex!" she answered, checking her sobs. "My old mother lives at

Lewes, that's all! Keeps a little huckster's shop, she do . . . just over the bridge . . . name o' Martin . . . and worrits 'er dear 'eart for me, I know . . . And so, young man, d'appen you get Lewes way, will 'ee find my old mother and say her Nance is — well, quite well and — happy?" She sobbed, stifling her misery in the threadbare shawl. "Will 'ee do this for a poor, miserable creeter, young man? Lewes . . . the little shop beyond the bridge . . . name o' Martin . . . O will ye do this for me, young man?"

"I will," he answered.

"Why, then, God bless 'ee! And now go, for you've a long road afore ye — good-bye, good luck and . . . God be kind to 'ee, young man!" So saying she smiled wanly through her tears and shrouding herself in the scanty shawl was lost amid the hurrying throng.

Then, turning his back upon the "ravening beast" the hero of this narrative trudged away to adventure the unknown.

CHAPTER VIII

Affordeth a Passing Vision of Our Heroine

Vain were it and wearisome to fully relate all his inconsequent ramblings, the many indignities he suffered, the ill-usage to which he was subjected, mocked at and abused by such wandering outcasts as he fell in with, the sport of brutish Ignorance, the very butt of Circumstance; fully to describe all this would be as painful in the relation as in the reading, and indeed has small bearing upon the main issues of this narration.

Let us then but glimpse him as he trudges resolutely southward all day long amid dust and heat, wind and rain, creeping at night into the shelter of some lonely rick or leafy hedge, jaded, hungry, friendless, yet upborne by the one indomitable purpose; upon his mumbling lip, for all and sundry, always and ever the same question:

"Which is the way to Loring Chase, Sussex?"

With this brief glimpse let us haste on to a certain hot, windless afternoon some weeks later when, gaunt and haggard, he turned from the heat and dusty glare of the road and crept into the cool, green shade of a wood whose twilight held a peace all its own, a hush of soft-stirring leaves, the fluty trill of a bird, the murmurous ripple of running water.

Lured by this right pleasant sound, he hastened forward eager to assuage his thirst and presently came upon a brook whose crystal waters sparkled in a fugitive shaft of sunlight.

So he drank his fill, bathed his hands and face and, greatly comforted and refreshed, sat staring down at

this joyous, babbling rill and presently sank into a half-doze. He was roused suddenly by a distant cry, a woman's voice fiercely upraised and the wild trampling of hoofs; hereupon he arose and pushing his way amid the underbrush came upon a wide green track or ride down which a tall and powerful horse galloped furiously and upon his back a woman low-crouched, her long, red-gold hair streaming from beneath feathered hat, her gloved hands gripped short upon the reins. And as he stared he heard again that loud, fierce cry, at which sound the great grey horse leapt, it seemed, to wilder pace; on he came, filling the woodland with the muffled thunder of his pounding hoofs, nearer and nearer until, above tossing mane, the watcher could behold a sullen, beautiful face, vivid of mouth, pallid of cheek, wide-eyed . . .

Instinctively the watcher crouched and, as the horse swept by, sprang and caught at the bridle, missed, and was hurled aside, was conscious of a shock, a roaring flame that seemed to scorch his brain . . .

CHAPTER IX

Of Peabody, the Poor Person's Practitioner

"Better now?" enquired a voice, faint from immeasurable distances. Our traveller sighed, made to open his eyes, found it an effort and lay still. "Better? Ay — better and better!" said the voice. "He lives — good! Or is it bad? Have I recalled from Styx deserving yet distressed Virtue or reduced Roguery — which? However ——"

Here our sufferer succeeded in opening his eyes and found himself staring up into a face bent over him, a round face wherein two round eyes peered down at him through large, round, horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Young man," quoth the face, blinking owl-like through these spectacles, "thy most desperate attempt at suicide succeeds not, thine act of *felo-de-se* frustrate is by reason o' the extreme thickness, the extraordinary hardness o' thy cranium, thy head, mazzard, or nob. However! Thanks to this abnormal thickness of your osseous processes and my humble self, you still draw the vital air ——"

"Who — who are you?"

"Peabody's my name," answered the little man, "Augustus Arthur Peabody, specialist in corns, warts, bunions, coughs, colds, the colic, megrims and the pip — I'll physic ye inside or out — there's never an ailment I can't alleviate — especially corns! A Chiropodist? No! I'm no pedantic pedicure — certainly not! I'm Peabody, the Poor Person's Plain Practitioner, and all by force o' circumstances. Wine? No! Women?

No! My reduction from an erstwhile modest independence to a curer of corns was horses . . . the gee-gees . . . the noble quadruped. I peddle pills, potions and patent fly-flaps and traps, but my patent corn-cure is the thing . . ."

"Pray, sir, how came I here . . . in this wood . . . hurt?"

"Your own doing, young man. However! Here you lie, fairly comfortable, thanks to me, your contused crown beautifully bandaged and thoroughly soaked and soothed by my corn-cure ——"

"Corn-cure!" exclaimed our traveller, starting. "But, good heavens, fellow ——"

"Lie still, young man, don't worry, my corn-cure cures everything, innocently innocuous, a complex compound chiefly concocted of H_2O with . . . a dash o' mystery, so cheer up. How are ye now — less dizzy?"

"Yes, thank you!"

"Good . . . that's the corn-cure! How d'ye feel generally — hungry?"

"Yes."

"Excellent . . . that's the corn-cure! Nothing like plenty of H_2O — with a dash o' mystery. However! Head ache much?"

"Horribly!"

"Good again, if it did n't you'd be deader than last week's mutton ——"

"Surely there was . . . I seem to remember — a lady?"

"Young man, there was . . . a youthful dame, yet of aspect haughty, of manners lofty, wearing, together with other garments, a plumed hat — a feathered fortune! However! 'Is the man hurt?' says she, deigning to check her wild career, 'Temporary concussion, madam,' says I, 'induced by local shock!' 'Poor man!' says she. 'Poor indeed and very much so, madam, judging by his looks!' says I, pointedly

prompt . . . Indeed, young man, I was so very promptly pointed that she proved more generous and came down handsomer than I would have thought — behold! Five shillings — for you, there y'are — take 'em, I 'm an honest man — by nature, alas — can't help it. However!"

"Five shillings? For me? But why?" enquired our traveller, sitting up with an effort.

"Why, for knocking you down, of course, and generous, considering it was entirely your own fault . . . take your money!"

Hereupon our traveller reached out, took the coins and tossed them over his shoulder into the dense-growing thicket.

"Why, dash me——!" gasped the little man, blinking more owl-like than ever. "Strike me deaf, blind and dumb if I ever saw the like o' this! . . . Five shillings! Thrown away! Lost! Never to be found! Well — damme! What are you, sir — who the Fiend are you to go hurling good money to the confounded rabbits — who are ye?"

"Well," answered our traveller in strangely soft, un-English drawl, "since you ask me, I 'm David Loring on my way to——"

He stopped suddenly to clasp his head, to stare between shaking hands at his worn boots and dusty limbs, to glance round about him in dazed fashion like one newly awakened, and to laugh for very gladness; laughter, this, that grew ever more shrill and hysterical until, somehow or other, he smothered it at last and sat rocking himself to and fro, face hidden in his hands, murmuring over and over again:

"David Loring . . . I am David Loring!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Peabody, observing him with growing apprehension. "What name did you say? David — who?"

"Loring . . . I am David Loring! Why, what

now?" For Peabody had risen and was looking down at David very strangely.

"I think," he answered, "I'm pretty sure your tumble hath affected you more than I thought!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if I was you, and hankered after a high-sounding name, I should choose some other — any other . . . De Vere, f'r'nstance, or Verney, or ——"

"And why not Loring?"

"Because 't is a well-hated name hereabouts, being the name of a merciless devil, a fiend, a blue-blooded scoundrel ——"

"Whom do you mean?"

"I mean Sir Nevil Loring . . . and I'm not afraid to say so — not I! Peabody fears no man alive, and as for Sir Nevil . . . well, I should like to ha' the dissecting of his cadaver! His heart would be a pathological curiosity — if he has one. However!"

Here the Poor Persons' Practitioner adjusted a somewhat bulky pack upon his shoulders, donned a high-crowned, wide-awake hat and nodded:

"You've an honest look about you, young man," quoth he, "so, if by reason o' your cracked cranium and consequent local shock you feel called upon to adopt another name than your own — choose something less noxious than Loring."

"Thank you, I will!"

"And if you should need work, I might find a job for ye. You can hear o' me at the 'Rearing Horse' Inn for the next day or so, then I am off to Lewes Fair."

"The 'Rearing Horse'?" repeated David. "Yes — yes . . . thanks, I shall not forget . . . good-bye!"

"Oho, you're uncommon eager to be rid o' me, young man! If you're hoping to get a word with the lady, your cake will be dough, my lad — she's meat for your betters! But you're young, and all young men are fools! However!"

So saying Mr. Peabody nodded, not unkindly, and ambled away leaving David in a rapture; for in place of the timid, shrinking creature he had been, the poor, futile thing of an hour ago, he felt himself a man again, rejoicing in his new-found self, bold for action and confident in his powers and the future.

Lost in this ecstasy he sat oblivious to all else until, roused at last by some sound, he glanced up to behold the lady approaching, her great horse moving at a gentle gait, his proud crest drooping, his glossy coat in a lather as by hard riding; espying David, she drew rein and sat looking down at him. Tall she was and well-shaped, a handsome, vigorous creature with sullen eyes, a full-lipped, petulant mouth and resolute chin; and yet, despite her vigorous youth and arrogant air, David saw within these sullen eyes an expression of — was it grief? Could it be fear? If so, of what? Of whom?

"Are you better?" she enquired in tone of utter indifference.

"Better than I was — thanks to you, lady!" he answered, rising instinctively.

"Why did you throw yourself upon my Brutus so madly?"

"I conceived that you were in danger, mam."

"Have you never seen a woman gallop a horse before?"

"Never so wildly."

"Do you know that you are trespassing, man? You had best go before the keepers find you . . . there is small mercy shown to vagrants hereabouts."

"I will go right now, lady! But first can you direct me to a house called Loring Chase?"

"I live there!" she answered, frowning suddenly.

"Indeed . . . are you a Loring, madam?"

"God forbid!" she cried, with sudden strange vehemence. "No — no, not I! There is no abominable

stain of Loring blood in me, thank Heaven! I am a foundling." Here she gathered her reins and condescended him a nod. "As for you, I should advise you to go about your business ——"

"Yes, mam!" he answered, bowing with ceremonious grace. "Pray how may I reach Loring Chase?"

"What is your business there?" she demanded.

"I desire to speak with Sir Nevil Loring ——"

"Speak with . . . him!" she exclaimed, visibly amazed and with a momentary pause before the pronoun. "Speak with Sir Nevil — you!" she repeated, amazement changing to contempt. "Sir Nevil will not trouble himself with . . . such as you!"

"Then, lady, such as I must trouble myself with Sir Nevil."

"You — would dare?" she questioned curiously.

"I would, mam ——"

"Because you don't know him!"

"Because I desire to know him, lady," David corrected.

"And who are you that is so venturesome?"

For a moment it was in his mind to confess himself, but chilled by her arrogant bearing and remembering the stubble on his chin, he shook his head: "A destitute nobody," he answered, "a homeless wanderer."

"Sir Nevil keeps the stocks for such!" she retorted.

"There are worse places!" he answered.

"And you are determined to see — him?" she questioned, leaning towards him.

"Yes, lady."

"Then the house lies beyond the trees yonder," said she, with a scornful gesture of her riding-whip. "But should you contrive to see him he may strike you — have you thrown out by the footman ——"

"I must risk that, mam," said David, glancing towards the trees in question, "he sounds a somewhat ferocious gentleman ——"

"He is hatefully, bitterly cruel!" she cried in sudden, wild passion, "A mocking devil . . . merciless as death——"

"I'm the more anxious to make his acquaintance, lady. But why do you speak such evil of him to a stranger?"

"Because he is all evil!" she cried between white teeth, "Too evil to live! Too evil to die! And yet he ought to die — he ought to die. . . . Oh 't is time someone killed him before he drives me to it——"

David recoiled a step, shocked to see the beautiful face suffused, the deep eyes ablaze, the delicate nostrils palpitant.

"Hush, lady!" he exclaimed, "Hush, mam, you talk wildly——"

"Because I am wild!" she panted, "Desperate with loathing . . . horror! He is so coldly determined . . . so evil . . . hateful——"

"Anticlea!" called a woman's voice, all tremulous with eager love, "Anticlea . . . O my dear, my dear! O child, how I have worried! He told me you were riding that dreadful Brutus and I came . . . running . . ."

"B'lindy — my own dearest dear!" cried the young Amazon, but with look and tone so changed, so ineffably tender that David stared, amazed at the swift transition, and turned to behold one who hasted towards them, a small, slender little woman, pale and insignificant but for her eyes, the splendour of silky, snow-white hair and the passion of mother-love that glorified her every look and tone and gesture.

"Dearest B'lindy, why trouble, why worry your dear small head for such a great, wild creature as poor me? And as for Brutus, see how I have tamed him!"

"And your beautiful hair all down!" wailed B'lindy, "and your habit torn! O 'Clea, some day he will kill you — I know——"

"So much the better, dearest . . . sometimes I wish he might!"

"Don't, 'Clea — don't! Ah no, no, how could I endure without you!" The gentle, pleading voice broke upon a sob, the white head was bowed upon the small white hands and then, with sudden pantherine leap, Anticlea had leapt to earth, had run to clasp that frail body in her strong, protecting arms, soothing, coaxing, caressing:

"Hush, Belovedst!" she murmured, "There, there — never weep for wicked me — you who have so many griefs! . . . I only mount Brutus when I'm most desperate — driven almost beyond endurance! The thrill of danger saves me from . . . worse things perhaps. Ah, B'lindy dear, you are quite distraught — yes, yes, I know . . . and I have frightened you — O hateful me! Come away, dearest, come . . ." And so, with arms entwined, the elder woman clinging to the younger, they turned and presently vanished amid the green, leaving David to stare after them in troubled wonderment and the huge horse Brutus to snort, shake his handsome crest and crop the grass with great apparent gusto.

CHAPTER X

Recounts How Loring Met Loring

In his great elbow-chair, with slender hands crossed upon his gold-knobbed cane, his age-old eyes turned pertinaciously towards the logs smouldering in the wide chimney, sat Sir Nevil Loring as if wholly unconscious of the tall, sedate young gentleman who stood beside him demurely patient, and so very still, except for the convulsive twitching of the hands behind his back.

At last Sir Nevil spoke, but without deigning his hearer a glance:

"So you love the vixen, do you, Maulverer? You, a high-minded, estimable young man, stoop to bestow your so honourable regard upon a female devil — a nameless bantling I took from the parish merely because at that tender age her kicking, screaming, infantile tantrums amused me. . . . You, of all men, honour this creature with your very respectful love? Absurd!"

The tall, stately, sober-clad young gentleman standing so respectfully at Sir Nevil's elbow glanced furtively down at the speaker while his muscular right hand, well hidden from view, clenched itself to a quivering, murderous fist; yet when he spoke his voice was softly modulated:

"And pray, sir, why 'absurd'?"

"Because she is so full of the devil and you of exalted virtue. Because, though circumstances necessitate you to serve me as librarian and private secretary, you boast an ancestry as proud and ancient as my own. And finally because this wild, unbroken filly, this

glorious termagant of mine hath no ancestry — the brat of a strolling player who, dying abandoned in her misery, left her by-blow to the parish — I say again — absurd! Forget the girl, think rather of your iron-fisted ancestor who charged with Cœur-de-Lion at Acre — or was it Jaffa?"

"Nevertheless, sir," answered Mr. Maulverer in his passionless voice, "there is only one Anticlea ——"

"Probably, Maulverer, though if you consult your classics you will read of another . . . I named my fair virago after the ill-famed, ill-omened daughter of Autolycus who, as you may remember, was a robber and too-complaisant father — having regard to Sisyphus, . . . and there were possibly others also before she married Laertes, King of Ithaca. She eventually killed herself . . . a wild, passionate creature, I suspect, and singularly like my Anticlea."

"Sir, there never was, there never will be another such as Anticlea."

"Why, she is unique in these days I grant you, Maulverer, these days of prim feminine milk-and-water meekness. Anticlea is as irreverent, as fiercely unrestrained and lawless as a pagan goddess — and as handsome — and mine, my dear Maulverer. And mine she shall remain while I live!"

"Then you refuse me permission to speak to her, sir — to urge my suit?"

"Utterly and absolutely, Maulverer. She does not love you . . . she never would!"

"None the less, sir, I had ventured ——"

"Tush, Maulverer! Even suppose she returned your passion, Anticlea as a wife would be an anomaly; the very idea is preposterous! Besides, I may have other designs regarding her . . . I am not too old to be stirred by beauty, Maulverer, nor so feeble as to be dead to the senses . . . the joy of dalliance may still possess an allure, Maulverer."

The tall young secretary slowly and softly recoiled from the speaker as from something inexpressibly loathsome, and he glanced swiftly towards the silver-hilted small-sword whose narrow blade glittered above the mantel, while his hand, always hidden, became a fist again — there was even a gleam of moisture beneath the hair at his temples; with his gaze yet upon that deadly blade he opened quivering lips as if to speak, vainly at first, it seemed, but when at last the words came, his voice sounded placid as usual:

"Sir, the love I bear your adopted daughter is ——"

"Daughter?" exclaimed Sir Nevil with a swift up-glance and, noting Maulverer's compressed lip, his pale cheek, the direction of his gaze, he smiled and nodded: "A dainty weapon, Maulverer, my grandfather killed his best friend with it for a creature far less wonderful than my Anticlea . . . and do not, pray, regard her as — my daughter, Maulverer, not my daughter — never that. And now, have the goodness to leave me, sir . . . those bailiff's accounts — the estimates for the new stables, I would have them all ready by this evening."

"They shall be ready, sir!" answered the secretary, impassive as ever, and bowing sedately, he stepped softly from the room, closing the door silently behind him.

Left alone, Sir Nevil reached an open volume from the small table beside him but sat with it on his knees, staring into the fire and smiling as one whose thoughts are wholly pleasant. From this smiling reverie he was aroused by the sudden reopening of the door and glanced round in some annoyance, expecting to see Mr. Maulverer. But, instead of that demurely elegant young man, he beheld one very different, one in worn boots and dusty clothes, whose dark head was swathed in a dirty bandage beneath which gleamed eyes strangely bright, steadfast and keen as his own.

"Ah!" murmured Sir Nevil, sinking back in his cushioned chair the better to survey this dusty and way-worn figure, "A stranger, I think?" Here he had recourse to his gold-mounted quizzing-glass, "Yes, upon my soul, a stranger! And unannounced! Highly irregular! And extremely grimy — hum! Pray, sir, favour me with the reason of this most unwarrantable intrusion — your name, sir?"

The newcomer closed the door and, leaning his broad back against it, returned Sir Nevil's scrutiny with the same keen, steadfast look.

"You are Sir Nevil Loring, I presume?" he enquired.

"I am, sir! And what then?"

"Why, then, sir, give me leave to tell you that I am David Loring, son of your elder brother Humphrey."

Sir Nevil leaned forward suddenly, his hands fast-gripped upon the arms of his chair, his eyes wide and staring; the book thudded to the floor all unheeded and for a moment was utter silence while eyes stared into eyes; then Sir Nevil sighed, his heavy lids drooped and, sinking back in his chair, he toyed idly with the ribbon of his glass.

"And so," said he, "you are my nephew, David Loring . . . you say! Gad's my life — you astonish me!"

"And you are my uncle Nevil, I perceive! *My* father has often described you . . . especially *your* eyes!"

"Ha! And my limp?"

"And *your* limp, sir."

"You know how I became a cripple, perhaps?"

"I know that *you* forced *my* father to a duel, sir."

"Now as to yourself," said Sir Nevil, "your somewhat distressful-seeming self, I remark in you none of the Loring features."

"I take after my mother, sir."

"Do you indeed!" murmured Sir Nevil, scanning

David through his glass again, "Pardon me, but I think not . . . No, your mother was a beautiful woman, I remember, and you . . . hum! But you have papers, of course, letters of identification, affidavits, your birth certificate! Come, your proofs, young man!"

"*I* have none, sir."

"Unfortunate!" sighed Sir Nevil, gently.

"They were stolen from me by a pretended friend, one Joseph Masson, a man I became intimate with aboard ship."

"Stolen, sir?" questioned Sir Nevil.

"The man invited me to dine with him so soon as we reached London. I did so . . . where we dined I do not know except that the place overlooked the river . . . the wine was drugged . . . before my senses left me I taxed him with it . . . we fought and Masson struck me down . . . robbed me of all I possessed, money, papers, the very ring off my finger . . . the snake-ring with emerald eyes, the ring which was an heirloom, and had been worn by my father — and *your* father before him! You, sir, you must know it — the Loring snake-ring with the emerald eyes?"

"A very moving story!" nodded Sir Nevil, "And where, pray, is the man Masson?"

"Why, sir, I fully expected to find him here at Loring Chase or in the vicinity. I came hoping to unmask the impostor."

"And lo!" smiled Sir Nevil, "You find him wholly non-existent, unless — ha!"

"Well, sir?"

"Unless he exists in — yourself!"

"In me, sir!" repeated David starting, "In me, sir . . . ?"

"Or you in him!"

"How, sir, do *you* dare . . . do *you* venture to suggest ——"

"We Lorings are daring and venturesome by nature, 't is a family trait! And, pray, how am I to know you are not this man Masson himself? Indeed the more I think, the more likely it becomes, for I have been shown my nephew David Loring's dead body ——"

"Impossible, sir ——"

"Pray be silent, sir . . . we Lorings detest interruptions of all and every kind! Now be good enough to hear me out: Some months since I received a letter from my brother Humphrey in Virginia informing me that his son David was about to start for England ——"

"My father wrote *you* that letter on his deathbed ——"

"About to start for England by a certain ship, that he would reach London on such a date. I journeyed to London to give him welcome, but very recently I learned from my lawyer that my nephew David Loring had been found dead . . . floating in the River Thames. So there is an ——"

"Dead?" gasped David, lifting hand to brow in the old dazed manner. "Dead? Impossible! I am he ——"

"I saw the body!" sighed Sir Nevil, "I gazed upon the poor mutilated corpse! I read and examined all the papers and articles found upon the remains. So there is an end of unfortunate nephew David, alas!"

"No, no, sir!" cried David. "Indeed you are terribly deceived for I . . . I who speak . . . I am David Loring!"

"Extraordinary!" murmured Sir Nevil, busy with his glass again, "Astonishing! Your vehemence distresses me. . . . We Lorings are never vehement — outwardly! A pinch of snuff, pray. You will find my box on the mantel, yonder." Like one in a dream David crossed to the high mantel, reached thence the box and tendered it to Sir Nevil, who slowly extended

his hand while his eyes, those keen, narrow eyes, focussed themselves on David's fingers.

"Ah!" he breathed softly, "I . . . thank you, sir!" Taking the box he threw himself back in his chair and, to David's horrified surprise, burst into a fit of sudden, shrill laughter.

"Why do you laugh, sir?" cried David, staring, "Why — why?"

"Egad!" gasped Sir Nevil, shaking his head, "'T is all so infernally — whimsically — perverse! So infinitely — ironically — droll, by Heaven! Begone, sir, while you are safe . . . away, sir, while I laugh . . . stay not until I grow serious lest I summon my grooms and apprehend you for the . . . clumsy swindler you are."

"Swindler, sir!" exclaimed David.

"And impudent impostor!" nodded Sir Nevil, his strange laughter still shaking him. "Here surely is one of Fate's little jokes . . . charmingly grotesque! Begone for the absurd and pitiful . . . rogue you are and . . . leave me to enjoy it."

But, instead of complying, David came a slow pace nearer, whereupon Sir Nevil, with a visible effort, checked his merriment to peer up at him, grimly challenging; and as they fronted each other thus, there was about both, in delicate, quivering nostril, down-trending, scornful mouth and in the set of the chin an air of latent power, of dominant will and cold calculation; but here all likeness ended, for David was above the average height and his eyes were wide, grey, and black-lashed.

"By Heavens, sir," he drawled, his pronunciation even more un-English than usual, "you are all — ay, more than my father described you . . . he merely named you unbrotherly and vindictive ——"

The smooth, lazy voice seemed to infuriate Sir Nevil for, uttering an inarticulate cry, he leaned suddenly

towards the speaker and struck at him savagely with his cane; but the blow was eluded, the cane twitched from his grasp, snapped across a dusty knee, and tossed into a corner.

"And now, sir," said David, "seeing you turn me out discredited for lack of papers, seeing you dare name your elder brother's son 'swindler' and 'impostor'—fighting words in Virginia, sir—I will take my leave. But first——"

Sir Nevil's white hand darted towards the small escritoire at his elbow, but David's hand was there first, had opened drawer and whipped up the small pistol concealed there, all in a moment; and now, turning the weapon dexterously upon his forefinger, he bowed: "First, sir," he continued, "permit me to tell you that I came to England with no thought of dispossessing you of this property that is truly mine, but rather in the hope that the years had sweetened you and I might find in you one to honour as a nephew and revere as a son . . . which, now that I behold you, sir, seems vastly ridiculous!" Here David laughed softly, still turning the weapon on his finger. "As it is, sir, when I leave this, my ancestral roof . . . do not be apprehensive, sir, I'm familiar with firearms . . . when I leave this ancestral roof of mine, take notice that I will never rest until I return with the law behind me, and then, sir, expect no pity. For mercy begetteth mercy and you have never——"

Here he paused suddenly and turned, as the door opened, to confront Mr. Maulverer, and as he did so, the pistol, spinning upon his forefinger, was suddenly arrested, its threatening muzzle directed between Mr. Maulverer's widely opened eyes.

"Pray come in, sir!" said David in the same unhurried manner, "Step in, sir, and trouble yourself to close the door! Perfectly!"

"Maulverer," said Sir Nevil, helping himself daintily

to a pinch of snuff, "pray observe this person . . . regard him well. I sit in jeopardy of my life at his hands, as you see. I shall go in such jeopardy henceforth. So be good enough to take particular note of his personal appearance, Maulverer, for if at any time in the future anything untoward should befall me . . . at any time, Maulverer, in any place, you will know what manner of rogue my slayer is. Now, pray open the door and suffer this would-be murderer to depart . . . we will permit him to creep forth as he crept in! Only henceforth, Maulverer, see the dogs are unchained o' nights, the doors and windows secure. And now have the kindness to stir the fire."

"Gentlemen, I salute you!" said David and bowed. "As for you, sir, pray remark that despite your dogs, your bolts and bars, I shall return sooner or later and then, sir, shall be vast change at Loring Chase! In earnest of which, I will make bold to take this with me." And thrusting the pistol into the bosom of his dusty, weather-worn coat, he bowed and stepped lightly out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Good heavens, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Maulverer, his natural placidity somewhat ruffled, "will you suffer the fellow to get away scot-free ——?"

"Most gladly, Maulverer."

"Why, then, sir — who — what is he?"

"Did you not hear his wild declaration?"

"Not a word, sir!"

"Ha!" smiled Sir Nevil. "And who is he, you ask? Maulverer, he 's one who fancies himself deeply wronged — by me. He is — alas, these wild oats, Maulverer! That young man represents himself the outcome of a . . . youthful indiscretion. Egad, how fatally true the old saying that one's sins will find one out and, sooner or later, come home to roost! And now, Maulverer, I 'll to the library, pray send Thomas Yaxley to me there — at once!"

CHAPTER XI

Further Concerning Him and Her

Meanwhile young David Loring went his way, light-treading and with head aloft, despite throbbing temples, for the cloud was lifted from his brain at last, the night-mare horrors that had haunted him were vanished, and, confident in himself and his manhood, he could have whistled although so mightily hungry. All at once he stopped, for before him was the indirect cause of this, the red-maned Amazon of the big grey horse; since to her, the horse, and his fall he, rightly or wrongly, attributed his recovery.

She was leaning to peer down into the stream where it formed a deep and stilly pool beneath the alders, and, unwilling to disturb her, he would have gone his way but at that moment she glanced round and saw him.

"Well?" she questioned, imperiously.

"Evil!" answered David, "I have seen — him!"

"Ah — and he turned you out?"

"He did so, lady."

"And you — go!" quoth she, with red lips scornful, "You run before his frown — like all the rest!"

"Yes, mam, only — I shall come back."

"When?"

"Sooner or later."

"Ah — bah!" she cried, "You never will . . . you are afraid!"

"Do you think that?" he enquired softly.

At this she condescended to look at him again, and beholding his grim-smiling, shapely mouth, his wide, bright, grey eyes, she hesitated and, being a woman,

immediately shifted her ground and questioned him anew.

"Did he glare at you . . . strike at you?"

"Both, lady."

"Then you saw his . . . eyes?" she questioned, whispering.

"Yes, I saw his eyes . . . eyes of a devil! Hate is there, and cruelty, and cunning, and mockery, and lust . . . cold and passionless! And you are a woman . . . very young . . . and beautiful. Take this!" And speaking, he drew the pistol from his bosom.

"Why — why, that thing is his!" she exclaimed.

"Was, lady! Pray take it . . . Many beautiful young ladies carry such in my country."

"Where is 'your' country?"

"Virginia."

"Where is that?"

"A long ways from here . . . Pray, won't you take it?"

"No — no! I am not afraid of him — or any man!"

"But he is no ordinary man."

"What matter? I do not fear him!" she repeated, "I never did fear him, and . . . besides ——"

"Well, lady?"

"You shall see!" And, turning her back, she stooped and swinging round, showed upon her pink, open palm a small silver-hafted knife or stiletto. "A gipsy woman sold it to me," she explained, "it is supposed to be a charm against all dangers."

"Indeed," he nodded gravely, "and so it might be — properly used."

"Why do you suggest such — horrors?" she exclaimed angrily.

"Why do you carry such a thing, lady? A pistol were better."

"Who are you?" she demanded, when she had restored the dagger to its hidden resting-place.

"My name is David," he answered.

"David — what?"

"Nemo, lady."

"It sounds foreign."

"It is foreign."

"I am glad my horse did n't injure you — badly."

"Thank you, mam. Also you left me five shillings."

"Did I? O well . . . I thought — I — I did n't know you were — O!" she exclaimed angrily and stamped spurred foot at herself.

"I thank you, none the less, lady."

"I tell you I did n't know you were a . . . you did n't . . . you don't look like a gentleman ——"

"Don't I?" said David, and smiled suddenly, whereupon she knit her brows and studied him a moment.

"Yes!" said she at last, "Yes! I beg your pardon, and to make amends you may return my poor five shillings, it is all the money I happen to possess for the moment."

"Lady, it was all the money I happened to possess at the moment and I threw it away."

"Threw it away indeed! Such pride was wickedly improvident and — ridiculous!"

"Pride usually is, lady."

"It is very strange that I should be talking so familiarly to a stranger."

"And very kind!" he added.

"You will forget — quite forget all the wild things I said to you, in the wood, concerning — him!"

"They are forgotten, mam."

"Now go, before Yaxley sees you."

"Who is he?"

"The head-keeper . . . an ogreish animal."

"I should like to see him, lady . . . ogres are rare in my country."

"What are you?" she enquired.

"A solitary wanderer."

"And a very strange one, I think."

"How strange, lady?"

"I have never met anyone like you before."

"And never will again!" he answered gravely, "For I have lately come up out of hell."

"What do you mean?"

"That, but for you, I might have crawled miserably to a miserable end . . . Will you give me your hand?"

Unhesitating she obeyed and for a moment they stood thus looking into each other's eyes:

"Good-bye!" said she, her voice somewhat kinder.

"Please, mam," said David a little diffidently, "will you tell me your name?"

"Anticlea," she answered. "It's a hateful name! He gave it to me because it is the name of a miserable creature who sinned and suffered and died hundreds of years ago . . ."

"And yet it is a beautiful name, I think!" said David, "Yes, a beautiful name . . . Some day, lady, soon or late, I shall come back, and I hope in better case," said he in his soft accents. "But whether or no, I shall always remember you gratefully — reverently. When I was a little lad my mother taught me to say this prayer:

> Be you awake, or be you sleeping,
> May angels have you in their keeping.

So I leave you with my mother's prayer to — shield you from all things evil."

Then stooping suddenly, he pressed his lips to her hand and strode away leaving her staring after him like one in a dream.

CHAPTER XII

Giveth Some Description of a Man with a Grievance

It was a small, snug inn remote from the highway and shaded by three tall trees; a cheery place whose twinkling lattices blinked in friendly sort, whose hospitable door gaped wide upon a clean, stone-flagged passage, and with a couple of wooden benches in its kindly shade to allure the wearied traveller.

Just now these benches were unoccupied; no human being was to be seen, no sound troubled the drowsy quiet save the distant clank of a well-bucket; the place seemed to doze in the pleasant afternoon sun.

Therefore David stretched himself upon the nearest bench and stared idly at the signboard above his head, a weather-beaten escutcheon whereon, in half-obliterated lettering, he made out the words:

THE REARING HORSE.
Jno. Vokes.

. . . and above this, a hazy semblance of what purported to be that spirited, high-mettled quadruped, but so blurred with stress of time and weather that it might have been anything in the animal kingdom from hippopotamus to rabbit; though, to be sure, it reared with a pertinacity that neither age nor fading colours could abate.

So David, sprawling upon the weather-beaten bench, stared up at the weather-dimmed sign, but with his mind busied upon many other and vastly different things; a hurry of thoughts concerning such matters as: red-

gold hair . . . Sir Nevil's sneering smile and demoniac eyes . . . his own present destitution . . . the wonder of his so suddenly recovered memory . . . his desperate fight for life, drugged and but half-conscious, with his would-be murderer Masson . . . the terrible blow that had struck him down . . . the plunge into icy waters which had roused him to a last fierce effort for life . . . the choking mud . . . the keen-eyed Shrig . . . the kindly, one-handed, gigantic Corporal Dick . . . Yes, he remembered it all, thank God! And — she had red hair! And he had never liked red hair in man or woman . . . And yet — her eyes were wonderful . . . brown! And she was shaped like a Greek statue — but . . . red hair!

Here, chancing to turn his head, he became aware of one who watched him from the shade of an adjacent tree, a broad-shouldered man, roughly clad, who leaned upon a staff, staring at him from beneath shaggy eye-brows, a very formidable-looking fellow, unkempt, haggard, and dusty with travel. Nevertheless, with that easy good-fellowship peculiar to him, David beckoned and hailed the man in his soft, drawling accents:

"You look kind o' spent, friend. Come and sit down with me. . . . I've been weary, too."

"Sit with ye, is it?" exclaimed the man harshly: "God love ye, chum, ye're the first to say a friendly word to me since I set fut in England."

"Are you a stranger also?" enquired David, making room for the other beside him.

"Ay and no!" answered the traveller, and sinking upon the bench wearily he sat awhile, chin on breast, staring before him beneath scowling brows; and now David saw he was younger than he had thought; it seemed to him that the haggard lines on the man's grim visage and the grizzled hair above the scowling brows were the work of other things than time.

"Pray, how old are you?" he enquired.

"Forty-one!" answered the other. "And I look sixty . . . and small wonder!"

"You have suffered?"

"Suffered?" cried the man hoarsely. "Ay, ye may put it at that, chum, ye may put it at that!" Here the speaker sighed and passed a scarred, toil-worn hand over his face and brow with a weary, despondent gesture. "You was a-lookin' at th' old sign, yonder!" said he suddenly, pointing upward with his staff.

"Was I?" said David, wondering. "Yes, maybe I was. What of it?"

"I minds it bein' painted, chum."

"It must have looked very different then!" said David.

"Ay, as different as—I did . . . Ah, that 'ere 'orse were summat to look at in them days—though, mind ye, the painter-chap made 'im a bit too round in the barrel mebbe, an' too long in the cannons, p'r'aps—but then . . . 'is mane an' tail! An' the way 'e reared an' pranced! Lord love ye, 't was a wonder 'e did n't rear 'isself clean out o' the picter! . . . That was twenty-five year ago . . . Tom Larkin 'ad the place then."

"Twenty-five years is a long time!" said David.

"Ay," nodded the man, "'t is longer than that—sometimes!"

"And you lived here, once?"

"Born 'ere. You 've never 'eard the name Bowker, 'ave ye . . . Ben Bowker?"

"Never."

"Don't live 'ereabouts, then?"

"No. I 'm a stranger—from overseas."

"Wheer away?"

"Virginia in America."

"Don't know it."

"Yet you have lived abroad also, friend?"

"Fifteen long year, chum! Austrayley . . . Botany Bay — that's me!"

"Ah!" exclaimed David. "You mean . . .?"

"I mean," said the man, scowling on the distance again. "I mean as I'm a 'lag'" . . . a time-expired convict . . . attempted murder — that's me!" Here was silence awhile: "Well," he exclaimed at last, "Why don't ye get up an' go? Why don't ye leave me — me as was Convict Two 'Undred and One, six months ago? Why don't ye make 'aste away from me — like all the rest of 'em?"

"Because," answered David, "had I been sufficiently tempted, one way or another, I might have been a convict also."

At this, the man, turning to scowl, opened his eyes to stare instead, in dumb amazement; then his grim lips twitched and bowing his head upon clenched fist he sat gazing blankly before him awhile.

"I was cast for transportation . . . fifteen years!" he mumbled at last.

"Then you have paid the penalty," said David, "and should start life anew ——"

"Not me!" grumbled the man fiercely. "Not me . . . my life's done . . . or soon will be! Let me but do what I came back to do and . . . I'm finished — ay, finished! They can do what they like wi' this 'ere carcass o' mine — then! But first . . . ay — first ——" The speaker's haggard face was suddenly convulsed as by a spasm and he wrenched at the neckerchief he wore, tugging at it as though it were strangling him.

"Friend Bowker," said David in his soft, pleasant voice, "tell me about your trouble ——"

"No!" snarled Bowker. "No — not me! Why should the likes o' me trust the likes o' you?"

"Because I'm a friendless wanderer like yourself."

"You look more like one o' — them!"

"One of whom?"

"The — gentry, dammem!"

"And yet, I'm truly as friendless, as destitute as yourself, Ben Bowker, more so, I guess."

"What — you?" growled the man bitterly.

"Indeed!" nodded David. "For I've neither food to eat nor money to buy any."

"What — are ye hungry, then?"

"Damnably!" sighed David.

"'Ungry enough to eat along o' Number Two 'Undred and One?"

"Try me!" said David.

Scowling, Ben Bowker arose and strode into the little inn whence he presently issued bearing a tray whereon was a crusty loaf, a thick slab of cheese, lettuce, onions and two large tankards topped by creamy foam.

And thus, seated in the pleasant sunshine, David Loring broke bread with ex-convict Two Hundred and One, and side by side they began to eat, nor did they speak until loaf and cheese were utterly demolished; then lifting his half-emptied tankard to his gloomy companion, David nodded cheerily:

"Happier days!" said he.

"No!" growled the man, shaking his head. "There ain't no 'appy days for me, chum — there never will be . . . ye see — I've lost 'er . . . my little Nan!"

"Ah," said David gently, "you mean . . . dead?"

"Worse!" growled the ex-convict. "Worse! She's 'opeless, mate, adrift in the world somewheers, and I can't find no trace of her. Looked 'igh an' low I 'ave . . . questioned all them as ever knowed 'er, ay, even 'er old mother, pore soul! Tramped the country lookin' for 'er, I 'ave, ever since I come back. . . . Some says she's dead and others say she's overseas, and some tell as she's . . . in London . . . my little Nan ——!"

"Then why not seek her in London?"

"I 'ave, chum, I 'ave! But London 's a big place . . . I've lost 'er! So — I've come back to th' old village to finish my job."

"What sort of job?"

"Just a . . . job, chum. A job as nobody can't do for me ——" Here the spasm shook him again and when next he spoke his voice sounded even hoarser: "Ye see," he explained, "we was to ha' been married, 'er and me, fifteen year ago ——" here he paused as if choking, then continued in a strangely hushed yet passionate eagerness: "A rare good an' sweet lass was my Nan, only — a sight too pretty. . . . Them was the happy days, chum, but they did n't last — not they! Bit by bit she began to change . . . grew kind o' timid-like, scared, chum, scared o' me, of me, chum! I used to find 'er cryin' fit to break a man's 'eart, I did . . . would n't tell me 'er trouble — no! But . . . I found out at last and one evening I took the old bagnet as used to 'ang above the chimbley and went through the coppice yonder to find and kill the fine gentleman as had murdered our 'appiness. . . . And find 'im I did . . . damn 'im! But 'e were too quick for me. . . . Shot me 'e did and 'is keepers came running. . . . Well, I 'd been a peaceable chap wi' a good character but they transported me . . . fifteen year . . . Botany Bay. . . . But arter I 'd done three year I grew wild for a sight o' my little Nan and Old England and I got away . . . nigh killed two of the guards, but get away I did . . . reached the coast starving and was give away by . . . a chap as sold milk! So they dragged me back . . . set me in the chain-gang, they did. . . . That turned me into a ragin' devil and I 'd be draggin' my chains yet, mebbe, only I saved the Governor's life . . . 'e made me his 'trusty' . . . I told 'im my story and . . . well, 'ere I be . . . back again arter . . . fifteen years."

"And what now, friend?" questioned David, his voice gentler than ever.

"No matter!"

"And — your Nan?"

"But I tell ye she's gone . . . lost ——"

"Then why not come back with me to London . . . we will seek her together; four eyes are better than two! Come, what do you say, Ben Bowker?"

"I says NO! If I can't find my lass I know wheer I can find — 'im!"

"You mean your enemy?"

"Ay — 'im!"

"And when you do find him — how then?"

"No matter!"

"In my country," said David frowning, "he would not live very long ——"

"'E won't in this!" muttered Bowker fiercely.

"But then," continued David, "the English law is a much stricter, sterner code than ours ——"

"What do I care for laws!" answered the ex-convict. "Let me meet this man once more — ah, just once and the law can do what it likes wi' me! Ay, ay, let me finish the job I began fifteen year ago and I'll swing j'yful — j'yful!" And in the speaker's twitching features and suppressed tones was a dreadful purpose and the more terrible for his very quietude.

"And this man who wronged you so bitterly lives close by, does he?" said David.

"I never said so!" growled the ex-convict suspiciously.

"Nor have you told me his name," said David softly, "and yet were I to make a guess it would be . . . Nevil Loring ——"

Almost as he uttered the words, Ben Bowker had him in sudden grip and was hissing fierce questions:

"Who are ye — who are ye as knows so much? Who . . . what are ye?"

"One who hates Sir Nevil scarcely less than you do——"

"Fine words — fine words!" panted Bowker. "And so soon as my back 's turned you 'll be off to tip him the office . . . to warn 'im as Ben Bowker 's home again to square accounts."

"Not I!" answered David quietly, "So loose my throat!"

"If I thought as you meant to queer my game——"

"I don't!" said David.

"'Ow can I be sure o' that? God . . . but I 've a mind to choke the life out o' ye and mak' sure——"

"You could n't!" said David.

"O . . . could n't I? What d'ye mean?"

"I should kill you first."

"Ah — would ye so——"

"Indeed I should."

David's voice was soft as usual, but reading the menace in his eyes, Ben Bowker slowly relaxed his grip and drew back, but crouched and quivering for sudden action, a desperate creature with eyes fierce and watchful and brawny fingers twitching.

"What 's y'r game?" he demanded.

"This!" answered David, showing the pistol he had grasped unseen. "Now mark me, Ben Bowker! I shall not trouble to warn Sir Nevil because he is very well able to take sufficient care of his most evil self, but I would rather warn you who are the better man. And I would warn you that in England whoso sheds another man's blood, no matter how great his justification, is a bloody criminal in the eyes of the law and must surely die a felon's shameful death——"

"And what o' that?" retorted Bowker. "Let 'em 'ang me! What 'ave I to live for——?"

"Your Nan——"

"She 's gone . . . lost . . . ay, dead, for aught I know——"

"Well, and if she is dead, friend, you must die, too, some day, and better go to her unstained by this evil blood——"

"Bah! Ye're talkin' like a damned parson . . . I 'ad enough o' them in gaol! If my Nan 's lost — she 's lost, and if she 's dead — she 's dead, and there 's an end. Anyway, I can't find 'er, so I 'll make an end of — 'im, ay, I will! And if I 'm for the topping-cheat arterwards, well, I 'll dance the Noogate Hornpipe as brisk as any other unfort'nate. So you go your way and I 'll go mine and mum 's the word! And if so be as you 're destitoot, why here 's for ye, chum!" Saying which, Bowker drew forth a net-purse from which he extracted two guineas.

"No, no!" exclaimed David. "No, no, Ben Bowker — indeed I could n't!"

"Could n't? O and why not? Is it because I 've been a convict? Why, damme, the money was come-by honest! 'T is money I worked for, years ago, money I put by for my weddin' . . . I tell ye — Stow it, pal, stow your bene — the cuffin 's dicking!"

"What do you mean?"

"Sit still . . . don't look round! I mean as there 's a queer cove twigging of us. Now is it me he 's a-watching or only you? It ain't neither . . . he 's a-watching someone be'ind 'im. All 's bowmon, pal, it 's only a peddler."

Glancing round, David beheld the Peddler in question approaching, a shortish, broad-shouldered man who sported such a proportion of beard and whiskers as left little of his features to be seen except a pair of very bright eyes; about his neck hung a variety of scarves, laces, ribbons, imitation gold chains and the like, samples evidently of the wares he bore in the bundle upon his back.

Being come up to them, he halted, touched finger to eyebrow and saluted them in jovial, hearty tones:

"Arternoon gents, an' a werry fine arternoon it be! Wot d'ye lack, gents? An 'andsome neckerchief in silk or cotton? Or vhat d'ye say to a pair o' laces, a penknife with an edge like a razor, a brush, an' shall ve say a comb? Come, gents!"

"Nothing, thank you," said David, while Ben Bowker merely scowled.

"Wot — nothink?" enquired the Peddler, no whit abashed. "Here's finger-rings, brooches an' neck chains as looks like gold, feels like gold an' may be gold for all I know, and remarkable cheap, being only eighteenpence — a bob, well — say a tanner! Wot, no? Why, then, wot about an 'at, young master — an 'at as vill roll or fold an' light as a feather . . . a good felt cady to keep your tibby from the sun . . . I've a nice soft 'at as will fit you to an 'air ——"

"And I have no money!" said David.

"O!" quoth the Peddler, "That alters the case, don't it? No money, no 'at and wersey-wicey — vich is a pity seeing as you needs an 'at considering your damaged tibby."

"I'll buy one!" growled Ben Bowker, thrusting hand into pocket.

"Spoke like a prince, sir, and right y'are, my lord!" cried the Peddler, unslinging his pack whence he extracted a shapeless something which by sundry slaps on his thigh, and dexterous pulls and twists, he transformed into a soft felt hat, grey of colour and ornamented by a broad white ribbon.

"Look at it!" he exclaimed, holding it out upon his fist. "Here's an 'at as is an 'at as can't be beat and seldom ek'alled nohow and novhere ——"

"Though somewhat conspicuous, perhaps!" smiled David.

"As conspicuous as ever vas!" nodded the Peddler. "'Ere's an 'at fit for the Prince Regent 'isself! There ain't another like it in all Sussex — no, not in all Eng-

land at the price — and dirt cheap at fi'-bob . . . 'arf a crown . . . two shillings . . . say eighteenpence!"

The ex-convict, scowling blacker than ever, paid over the money, whereupon the Peddler nodded cheerily, pocketed the coins and, catching up his pack, vanished into the inn. Then Ben Bowker tossed the hat towards David:

"There y'are!" he growled. "Tak' it or leave it!" And, rising abruptly, turned to go; but David rose also and stayed him with a gesture:

"Friend Bowker," said he, putting on the hat, "I'll take this and wear it gratefully. And, because I've conceived a great liking for you, I'll borrow your two guineas — if you're still minded to lend them — hoping to meet and repay you soon ——"

"'S all right, chum, 's all right, never trouble!" said Ben Bowker in changed voice, pressing the money upon David with an eagerness that seemed to him almost pathetic. "S' long chum . . . and . . . good luck!"

"Good-bye!" said David, gripping the ex-convict's work-roughened hand. "Good-bye, Ben Bowker and I hope for your own sake that when you find your Nan, in this world or the next, you may be as guiltless of blood as you are to-day ——"

Now at this, Bowker snatched his hand from David's clasp and clenched it slowly while his scowling gaze sought afar the gables of Loring Chase bowered amid trees; then, muttering inarticulately, he turned and strode away.

CHAPTER XIII

Tells how Loring Met Loring for the Second Time

Long after Ben Bowker had trudged out of sight, David sat chinking the coins softly in his hand.

With this money he might reach London speedily and in comfort, there to seek out the man Jasper Shrig, the Bow Street Officer who had already befriended him and who might put him in the way of lawfully establishing his identity . . . He would catch the mail . . . Yes, it should be London and Jasper Shrig; but first he must eat.

Having thus determined his immediate course of action, David arose and stepped into the cosy taproom of the inn, a place deserted at this hour save for a smoke-frocked patriarch who snored gently in a corner, but who now, upon David's entrance, opened his eyes, blinked and sat up broad awake in a moment.

"Goo' arternoon, young sir!" he croaked. "You 'll be wantin' a drop o' summat, sure-ly?"

David admitted the fact, whereupon the old man thumped the floor with his stick and nodded triumphantly:

"I knowed it!" quoth he. "Ah, an' wot 's more I can see as you 've got a koind 'eart which Oi be glad on, fur it du so 'appen as oi be wantin' a drop o' summat, tu . . . Tom — O Tom!" and the Patriarch rapped louder than ever; at which summons appeared a rotund, bullet-headed man who beamed, nodded and yawned.

"Wot now, Gaffer?" he enquired.

"Beer, o' course, Tom! A pint for that theer young gen'leman an' a pint for Oi — an' that theer young gen'leman to pay."

"'Oo says so, Gaffer?"

"Why, that theer young gen'leman's kind 'eart fur sure . . . a 'drop o' summat mellerin' fur pore old Jole,' it do say, plain as plain! Now, don't it, young maaster?"

"Why, surely!" laughed David, laying down one of his guineas. "Also if you have any cold meat, landlord, ham, say, or beef — pray bring it ——"

"'Am, Tom — O, 'am!" piped the Patriarch, esctatic. "Oi could eat 'am for a hower, I could. Theer ain't no fodder as Oi enj'ys so much as 'am, except beef an' mutton, or a chicken — though a bit o' fish comes grateful ——"

"'Ark to 'im, sir!" quoth the landlord, stifling another yawn. "And 'im so old ——"

"Beer, Tom!" cried the old man, thumping with his stick again. "You 'eered wot the young gen'leman said — beer an' beef an' 'am, an' plenty on 'em — 'ungry Oi be!"

"'Ungry!" repeated the landlord. "Nobody never knowed you nothing else, Gaffer! Sir, 'e du be for ever a-muzzlin' or a-guzzlin' ——"

"That be the best o' innards the likes o' mine!" nodded the Patriarch. "Stretches an' stretches, they du — noble!"

"Some day you 'll stretch 'em too fur, Gaffer, so sure as your name be Jole Bybrook, an' then — well . . . summat 'll 'appen 'orrid!"

"'Old your tongue, Tom, an' bring in they vittles — sharp!"

The which being duly brought, down sat David and the Patriarch and forthwith fell to with hearty appetite; indeed, the aged Mr. Bybrook plied knife and fork with such amazing energy that David paused at

last to watch him with amused surprise; whereupon Mr. Bybrook suspended action long enough to proffer the following explanation:

"Ye see, I wur a sextant, I wur!"

"Indeed?" said David wondering.

"Ah! And my fayther 'e wur a sextant afor' Oi, an' my b'y 's a sextant arter Oi!" Having said which, the Patriarch went on eating faster than ever, while the sleepy landlord yawned and watched.

And in a while David arose and, bidding them good-day, stepped forth of the "Rearing Horse" Inn and set off London-wards.

He had gone but a little way, however, when he heard the squealing whinny of a horse, the pounding of flying hoofs, saw a great animal leap a gate upon his left to burst through the opposite hedge and vanish.

Now, recognizing this riderless animal, David vaulted the gate and hurried across the meadow beyond, staring about him as he ran; and thus presently espied what he expected yet dreaded to see.

Upon the verge of a wood she lay face down across the fallen branch which, it seemed, had swept her from the saddle. Awed by the silence and dreadful immobility of this shapely body he knelt and with reverent hand ordered the rumpled folds of her long habit and then, tenderly as might be, raised that fallen head. . . . A pallid face, paler by contrast with the black brows and drooping lashes so oddly out of keeping with her red hair; full, shapely lips drained of their vivid colour; delicate nostrils which, as he watched, quivered to a faint-drawn breath. . . . Thank God, she lived! She must have air. . . . With clumsy fingers he loosed the fastenings at her neck, disclosing a throat smoothly round and of that snowy whiteness peculiar to red hair. Was she still breathing? By Heaven — no! . . . Thank Heaven — yes! . . . Well, then, she must have water — immediately . . . water was the thing,

of course! Holding her thus cradled in his arms he glanced wildly around and, as fortune would have it, heard the welcome ripple of a brook amid the adjacent green. Raising her with mighty effort he got to his feet and bore her into the wood, treading slowly and with infinite care until he came at last to a little stream which flowed murmurous in the shadow of a great tree whose spreading branches made a kind of bower. Here he laid her down and, filling his cupped hands from the stream, laved her head, her pale face, her throat and hands with the life-giving water until at last, to his infinite relief, she sighed, shivered and opened eyes big with wonder.

"Are you better?" he enquired gently.

For a moment she stared uncomprehendingly, then, wrinkling her brow, shivered again.

"What do you want? . . . What am I doing——?"

"You were knocked from your horse," he explained.

"Yes . . . I remember . . ."

"Are you in pain . . . ?" he enquired, leaning over her, "Are you hurt?"

"No . . . not yet!" she answered and clung to him suddenly, hiding her face against him like a frightened child. . . . David could feel her trembling as she lay.

"I—I feared you were—were dead . . ." he stammered.

"Feared?" she repeated, pressing to him closer yet, "Oh, there are worse things than Death . . . Death is not vile . . . Death is freedom. I should be happier—better, dead!"

"You?" he exclaimed. "You—so young? There—there! What troubles you, child?"

"I am . . . afraid . . . afraid!" she whispered.

"Of—of him, child?"

"Of myself! And I am . . . lonely, so lonely!"

"Tell me," he urged gently, "Pray tell me your trouble."

At this, she drew away from him to lean back against the great tree and view him sullen-eyed.

"You need n't have wet my hair!" she exclaimed petulantly.

"Forgive me, but you . . . you needed water——"

"And you have soaked me!"

"But 't was well meant, mam!"

"And . . . my neck . . . !"

"You needed air, lady!"

Here, having dried face and neck as well as she might on a diminutive handkerchief, she rebuttoned the bosom of her habit, frowning at him meanwhile.

"How did I come here in the wood?" she demanded.

"In my arms, lady."

"I wonder you were able! Was I heavy?"

"Extremely, mam!"

At this she scowled blacker than ever.

"Then indeed, sir, you must be stronger than you look."

"Yes, mam. And I would humbly suggest that you give up riding vicious horses——"

"My Brutus is not vicious. . . . And if he is, so much the better."

"He might have killed you——"

"'T is pity he did n't!"

"Hush, mam! If you had indeed been killed——"

"'T would have been your fault, sir!"

"Mine?" gasped David, "Pray how in the world, mam——"

"You roused the devil in—in him . . . Sir Nevil, and he . . . Well, I only ride Brutus when I 'm driven to it! . . . What did you do so to madden and enrage Sir Nevil?"

"Nothing I regret, lady."

"He is in one of his cold furies! Everyone fears him in his cold fit . . . everyone but me! The sooner you go away from Loring the better for yourself . . . You

took a pistol from him, did n't you — the one you showed me?"

"Yes, mam."

"How — tell me how."

"I happened to . . . reach it first."

"So you did not steal it, then?"

"Well, I took it, lady, to . . . prevent any chance of an accident."

"You mean he threatened you with it? You mean he ——"

"Was not quite quick enough, mam."

"I 'm glad you are not a thief."

"Thank you, lady."

"Sir, are you laughing at me?"

"No indeed, mam."

"Anyway, thief or no, you had best leave here soon . . . soon!"

"You think he means me harm?"

"I . . . I don't know. But he is always dangerous in his cold anger."

"Then that settles it, mam. London must wait. Guess I 'll camp in Loring Village a spell."

"Then you are foolish!" said she, viewing him with troubled eyes, "Yes, very foolish! You will remain, I suppose for the sake of your silly pride?"

"And — a better thing, lady. A while since you said you were 'afraid' and 'lonesome.' Well, now, I just want you to know I shall be near if you need me . . . a friend you may rely on in any trouble, one who will be glad to help or serve you any way, for . . . O well ——!"

"For what?"

"For the sake of the mother who taught me to respect and serve all women who were any ways troubled or distressed."

"It must be a wonderful thing to have a mother!" said Anticlea frowning down at the rippling water,

"I . . . never knew my mother; she was an outcast, a pauper . . . she died of want when I was born. To have had a mother to know and love . . . yes, I think I have missed a great deal . . . perhaps. And yet . . . I have my B'lindy, and she's more to me than——"

Anticlea stopped all at once to sit rigidly staring; and in that same moment, David was upon his feet, for there within a yard of them, leaning gracefully upon his cane, his handsome, aquiline features softened by a sad and wistful smile, stood Sir Nevil Loring:

"Forgive me if I intrude," said he in his strangely pleasant tones, "but hearing voices as I limped past, I ventured here and found you so absorbed that I startled you, I fear."

"Indeed, you walk very silently, sir!" retorted David, chin uplift.

"Ay, I do — I do!" sighed Sir Nevil, "My gait, as you may have remarked, is a hideous hobble, sir, and being an over-sensitive cripple, I hobble softly to escape such notice as I may. . . . But, young sir, I am glad to find you again that I may express my sincere regret for the reception I accorded you this morning. Sir, I am a wild, passionate creature, God forgive me, and given to gloomy despondencies and sudden angers, as this dear maid of mine could tell you if she would. . . . Thus, sir, I freely confess myself to blame and, craving your forgiveness, reach you my hand in friendship . . . if you will accept it?"

From her position a little out of Sir Nevil's line of vision, Anticlea frowned at David with a very slight shake of the head; perceiving which, David stood awkward and hesitant.

"Sir Nevil," said he, flushing, "you — your unexpected kindness . . . your courtesy . . . unlooked-for humility, sir . . . amazes me almost beyond expression——"

"And will you therefore suffer me to plead in vain, young sir?"

Now, hearkening to this sweet, soft voice, moved by the wistful sadness of this handsome, gentle face, David stepped forward impulsively and clasped the slender hand reached out to him:

"Sir," said he, "say no more, I beg. Your doubts concerning me were probably justified . . . my wild looks . . . these shabby clothes ——!"

"Noble youth!" sighed Sir Nevil, "Your generous forgiveness touches me sensibly, indeed far more deeply than my poor words ——"

The soft voice was drowned by a sudden, mirthless laugh, loud and strident:

"Alas, sir," cried Anticlea, laughing still, "and my handkerchief is wringing wet, so don't—O, do not weep, I beg!" And beholding all the bitter mockery of curling lip and bright, wide eyes, David drew back a pace, shocked and amazed:

"Lady ——" he began.

"Nay, sir," sighed Sir Nevil, "do not chide her, she is but the expression of my teaching . . . and by nature a wild creature with will unbroken . . . a child-woman whose heart and senses slumber yet. Some day, my Anticlea, you shall wake, ah yes . . . wake to love and womanhood; perhaps then you may be a little kinder to even an unlovely cripple such as I . . . who knows?" And reaching out a swift, white, slender hand he touched the red-gold splendour of her hair, a soft, caressing touch infinitely gentle; but she shrank and cowered, starting as if his hand had stung her.

"Don't!" she panted, "Ah—don't dare!" And then, swift and graceful as some startled wild thing, she was upon her feet, her back to the tree, fiercely defiant; while David, mute with surprised dismay, stared from the distorted beauty of her face to Sir

Nevil who, bowing his head, spoke in voice almost whispering:

"O, my dear!" sighed he. "My dear!" Then, turning to David, he smiled ruefully: "Alas, sir," said he sadly, "Youth is sometimes a little cruel! . . . And yet, how should I complain, I, who from her youth up, have set her so ill an example . . . I, the man of glooms, despairs, and black choleric humours? Verily I am but justly requited, yet the sword of Justice bites deep — deep! . . . But enough of this. You will, I hope, be my guest to-night. To-morrow if you wish, horses and carriage shall be at your service — nay, indeed, I myself will drive with you to London upon that business which touches us so vitally. But to-night you shall know the hospitality of Loring Chase. . . . You will not deny me, I hope?"

Here, once again, David saw the fierce, negative shake of Anticlea's shapely head.

"You will give a somewhat solitary man this pleasure, sir?" enquired Sir Nevil, wistfully.

"Sir," answered David, after a brief hesitation, "it will be an honour!"

"Why, then," said Sir Nevil, "pray lend me your arm, sir. And do you, my Anticlea, go before and say we have a guest."

For a moment she stood frowning from one to the other, then, without uttering a word, caught up the long skirts of her habit and hurried away.

"A beautiful, tameless creature, sir!" sighed Sir Nevil as they followed, side by side, "and yet, with all her wildness and sharp irreverent tongue I could not bear to lose her. . . . Doubtless you have recounted to her something of your romantic story . . . disclosed your identity . . . the purpose of your coming . . . she would be interested, I presume?"

"No, sir," answered David, "I have told her nothing beyond my first name."

"I commend your discretion, sir. Women, even the best, are apt to tattle. . . . See, there is the moon already, it will be a . . . glorious night. To-morrow we will to London where our lawyer Gillespie shall resolve for us the mystery of the David who lies dead and buried and the David who is."

Thus walked David with Sir Nevil's hand upon his arm, listening while his uncle talked of past, present and future; and hearkening to this pleasant, sweetly-modulated voice, beholding the wistful kindliness of this handsome face, David felt himself drawn more and more to this kinsman he had so misjudged.

Reaching the house at last, David was ushered upstairs by a deferential, soft-treading footman to a sumptuous chamber where new clothes and fine linen awaited him, together with a deft-handed valet who duly shaved and groomed him. But clothes and linen David refused and, at summons of a soft-toned bell, descended the broad stair in his own shabby garments, (albeit sufficiently brushed) crossing a wide and lofty hall dim-lighted by windows high in the wall, he paused to glance around upon rich arras, carven beam and the glint of ancient weapon. Now, as he stood thus, lost in admiration, from a certain low-arched, curtained doorway flanked by effigies in dull-gleaming armour, stepped Anticlea; she had exchanged her riding-habit for a high-bosomed gown that clung about her loveliness, her gleaming hair was coiled high, yet with ringlets that flowed wanton to kiss smooth, rounded cheek; David stared until she frowned, whereupon he bowed his stateliest and thus beheld a slim, sandalled foot that tapped in angry impatience:

"So you refuse to be warned, sir!" said she below her breath.

"Of what, lady?"

"Of — him! Though I am wondering why he should trouble to deceive — such as you! Who are you?"

"Deceive?" repeated David, a little haughtily.

"Hush!" she exclaimed imperiously, "speak softly as I do!"

"And why must you whisper, mam?"

"For very good reason! What can be the cause of his play-acting — who are you?"

"Surely your suspicions of him are unjust, lady?"

"And surely you are a lamb — a silly sheep!" she retorted angrily yet in the same suppressed tone. "But the doors are unlocked, sir, you may still escape before the wolf shows his teeth!"

"Lady," said David, with another stately obeisance, "I would remind you that the gentleman in question is my host ——"

"And you are a blind fool!" said she, fiercely scornful. "But I know him for the devil he is ——"

"O, pray hush, mam!" exclaimed David, shocked again by her passionate vehemence. "Your hatred for him is very sufficiently apparent and renders you hysterical ——"

"Hysterical — I?" she exclaimed angrily.

"At least," answered David, "you surely talk wildly. . . . And, indeed, seeing I am his guest it were unworthy in me to listen ——"

"Admirably said, sir!" murmured a soft voice, and Sir Nevil limped towards them from the shadows.

"What, are you there, sir — peeping and prying as usual?" said Anticlea scornfully.

"Ay, I am here, child!" he answered in his sad, gentle voice, leaning upon his cane to view her, wistful-eyed.

"O, I don't fear you, sir!" she exclaimed, drawing herself erect so that he must needs look up at her, "I never did fear you, I never shall! Harm me, Sir Nevil Loring, harm me or any that I love and . . . so help me God, I'll kill you — and you know it!"

"Hush, child, hush!" pleaded Sir Nevil. "Indeed

you grow hysterical and talk wildly as our young friend says! . . . Heed her not, young sir, I beg! There — there, my Anticlea, be calm!" As he spoke he reached out his hand with sudden, swift gesture and laid it tenderly upon her shoulder; but with a gesture terrible to see, so wild and furious was it, she dashed that gentle hand away and, uttering an inarticulate cry, swept the curtain aside and was gone.

"Poor wild soul!" sighed Sir Nevil, distressfully. "Is there, think you, a passion so unreasoning as a woman's hate? Surely not! To what dark abysses of shame and horror may it plunge one! . . . Heaven shield thee from thyself, my Anticlea! . . . Pray, sir, lend me your arm; these incidents trouble me despite my philosophy. Come, the dinner waits, we will dine alone, kinsman."

CHAPTER XIV

Telleth of a Strange Transformation

"Yours is indeed an enthralling, a wonderful story!" said Sir Nevil, leaning back in his chair. "In your place, I should be eternally grateful to that poor unfortunate rogue Masson, for he undoubtedly saved your life! Indeed a truly marvellous story!"

"And you believe it, sir?"

"Every word, nephew, every syllable!" said Sir Nevil, delicately skinning a peach. "You ran great peril and entirely through not keeping your own counsel."

"I was an egregious fool, sir!" said David, watching the play of those long, white fingers opposite.

"It will be a . . . lesson to you — eh, nephew? You will keep your concerns to yourself, henceforth?"

"Yes, indeed, sir!"

"Except to your friends, of course. Have you many friends in England, kinsman?"

"None, sir!"

"Or . . . acquaintances?"

"Two only, sir, and they are in London."

"Indeed? Two acquaintances? In London?"

"It was they who found me in my misery . . . fed and sheltered me, sir."

"Worthy creatures! You are grateful, of course?"

"Beyond expression, sir. My case would have been desperate indeed but for the charity of Corporal Dick and Jasper Shrig."

The long, white fingers grew suddenly still and, glancing up, David beheld two eyes very wide open

and strangely brilliant that woke in him a vague disquiet, then the heavy lids hid them and Sir Nevil was busy with his peach again.

"Wonderful!" he murmured. "Amazing coincidence! I happen to be acquainted with Jasper Shrig . . . he is a Bow Street Officer, I think?"

"A Bow Street Officer, yes, sir!"

"And being very naturally so full of gratitude you will doubtless seek him out?"

"Assuredly, sir!"

"Ah!" sighed Sir Nevil gently, "Very right! . . . But you drink nothing, kinsman! This wine of Oporto now, 't is a rare vintage of reverent antiquity and worthy all honour."

"Thank you, sir, but I have never tasted wine since that dreadful night, and probably never shall; it would nauseate me."

Sir Nevil lay back in his chair, pointed chin sunk amid the frill at his bosom; and meeting the keen scrutiny of these eyes, David felt yet again that sense of vague disquiet.

"Then you will not drink, kinsman?"

"Thank you — no."

"Abstemious youth!" murmured Sir Nevil. "Then neither will I. . . . Instead I will scrape my fiddle at you!" With surprising nimbleness Sir Nevil rose and, crossing to a tall armoire, came limping back bearing bow and violin. "An ancient instrument, kinsman!" said he, patting the violin with slim, caressing fingers, "an instrument wise with years, mellowed by time and consequently knowing much of good and evil. . . . It can laugh with Folly, sing with Joy, and weep with Sorrow — hear it!" And tucking fiddle beneath pointed chin, Sir Nevil swept the strings with assured bow. . . .

A lilting melody full of wild laughter and a madness of dancing feet, broken in upon by a sudden harsh

dissonance changing to solemn chords which rose to a wild passion of wailing anguish that sank again in notes of tender yearning to die away in a sigh of agonised regret.

"Here, kinsman, is an old fiddle wise in that futility we call 'Life'," said Sir Nevil, lowering the instrument.

"O, sir . . . sir," stammered David, "you . . . O, indeed you are a great master!"

"Tush!" smiled Sir Nevil, though quick to heed David's awed sincerity.

"Pray . . . pray, sir, continue."

"Egad!" laughed Sir Nevil, "If you are indeed fond of music you shall hear me really play and, which is better, Mrs. Belinda shall sing to us." And he rang the silver hand-bell which stood at his elbow, whereupon a soft-stepping manservant entered and bowed.

"Pray bid Mrs. Belinda to the organ!"

The servant departing, Sir Nevil rose and led the way into the dim hall where presently was the flutter of a gown, the tread of quick, light feet, and Mrs. Belinda was before them.

"Yes, Nevil?" she questioned in her gentle tones. "What must I play?"

"Mozart, child! The divine Mozart who said more in music than any ever said in words."

Obediently Mrs. Belinda, seeming slighter and more girlish than ever, seated herself at the great instrument; and suddenly, beneath those small, white fingers, swelled a glory of rushing melody which, rising to an ecstasy, sank to a plaintive murmur dominated by the sweet, wild notes of the violin.

For an hour they played thus, compositions of the long dead master, and all without a written note.

"Enough, child!" sighed Sir Nevil at last. "Now sing to us."

"Yes, Nevil, I shall sing your song . . . the song you wrote when . . . we both were young."

"No, no! Sing something more worthy your voice."

"Nevil, I sing nothing better than . . . your song . . . listen!"

Out pealed the organ again and then, high and sweet and clear above the swelling chords, rose a voice so richly wonderful that David wondered anew. And these the words she sang:

"Come, gentle Night with dewy wings,
Sink, glory, in the west;
Come, Night, and to all weary things
Give that sweet solace slumber brings;
Forgetfulness and rest.

O Death, since thou art kin to Sleep,
Kind friend, I 'll fear thee not.
So when I die let no man weep
But in the darkness lay me deep,
Forgetting and forgot."

"Bah!" exclaimed Sir Nevil as the music died, "What a sentimental youth was I! But egad, I had my dreams — once! . . . You may go, Belinda, thank you, child, and good night. Your voice is wonderful . . . time doth not impair it! You have soothed me, as you ever do. To-night, mayhap, I shall sleep — good night!"

Murmuring his gratitude in turn, David bowed over Mrs. Belinda's small, white fingers and watched her flit softly away, lost in his wonder still.

"Yes," sighed Sir Nevil, "I think I may sleep to-night. And yet — who knows! I am much cursed with insomnia, sir, at which times bed is a torment, and I walk. So should you chance to hear my hideous limping footstep in the small hours you will know my curse is on me. . . . To slumber dreamlessly — ah, here sure is a very gift of heaven . . . a surcease from pain of soul and flesh — a rejuvenation. . . . And yonder comes Jordan to light you to bed; good night, young sir, and may your slumbers be — sound!"

CHAPTER XV

Concerning the Events of a Night

David's keen glance had remarked it so soon as the door had closed behind the silent manservant; and now, having glanced round the sumptuous chamber with its rich furniture, its luxurious rugs, its walls covered with stamped leather, he must turn back to stare at the thing again: this picture seemingly sunk within the wall itself, this painting of a bewigged, heavy-faced gentleman who scowled from a dingy background, a very sinister-looking gentleman whose evil eyes seemed to follow David's every movement as if trying to stare him out of countenance, so much so indeed that almost instinctively David took to watching him also.

Being in bed at last, David settled himself to sleep, but with his face in the direction of the picture; and now as he lay thus, staring upon the dark, he was conscious again of that vague and unaccountable disquiet; the picture, the dark room, the very air about him seemed to hold a menace of coming evil. At last, moved by some impulse he slipped out of bed, groped to the door and turned the key, wondering at himself the while. But worn and weary, David fell asleep at last and, dreaming unhappily, awoke to find his chamber bright with the moon, and the bewigged gentleman scowling at him more ferociously than ever. So lying outstretched in luxurious ease, David stared back at this pictured face, wondering idly who he had been, and then sat up all at once to stare in breathless intensity, for it seemed to him that the eyes of this picture had blinked. . . . Motionless and scarcely breathing David

stared, every sense strung and alert. . . . Yes, surely these eyes seemed horribly alive . . . and yet — even as he gazed, the pictured face glared back at him suddenly blank and lifeless.

Out from the sheets leapt David to seize a chair, to set it beneath the picture; and mounted thereon, being thus near, saw that the eyes of this malevolent pictured face were no more than paint after all. Descending from the chair he anathematised his folly; and yet something in this sombre room, the deep hush of the great house, something he knew not what, chilled him, though the night was warm, and he shivered violently. One of the latticed casements was open and going thither he leaned out, breathing an air fragrant with honeysuckle, and looked down upon a broad sweep of marble terrace with lawns and stately trees, beyond, whose dark shapes, stark against the moon, stirred not, for the night was very still. Then out from these sombre shadows crept another shadow, a shapeless thing that flitted unheard, nearer and nearer until David could see it was a man with a mighty bush of hair, a man who crouched to peer this way and that and so was gone.

David turned from the window and, moved again by some compelling influence, began to dress, swiftly. He was reaching for his coat when he paused, fancying he heard something, a soft, blurred sound somewhere behind the panelling, a stealthy sound which resolved itself into a furtive, limping footstep.

On went David's coat, and his fingers closed grimly on the silver-mounted pistol in his pocket. Then, taking boots beneath his arm, he crept softly towards the door, and halted in shocked amazement; for, locked though it was, this door was slowly, softly opening.

David cocked and whipped out the pistol only to hide it as swiftly behind him and shrink back as Anticlea stepped softly into the room.

"Hush!" she whispered, "You refused to be warned! . . . Listen!"

From somewhere in the shadows of the great house came the sound of that creeping, limping footstep.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Quick!" she breathed, "Follow me!" As she spoke she caught his hand in warm, purposeful fingers and led him swiftly along a thick-carpeted passage to a chamber where candles burned whose soft light showed him a luxurious bed, a dressing-table where glass and silver glittered, a chair heaped with feminine garments and an open window.

"There lies your way," she whispered, "you must climb down!"

"How so, lady?"

"By the ivy stems. Quick, I tell you . . . I have done it many a time — go, go!"

"But — why, mam?"

"Oh — just because! Now — hurry!"

"But, mam, why should I run away ——?"

"Quick — quick! He — Yaxley is coming!"

"But who — what does it all mean?"

"I . . . I don't know . . . only go away — hurry!"

So David swung himself out over the sill and grasping the gnarled ivy stems, began to descend forthwith and found it a matter of no great difficulty. Having descended thus a little way, he glanced up to whisper yet another question, but saw the lattice above him was already closed and dark.

Reaching the ground he stood a moment to stare round about and up at the house in an ever-growing wonder; and thus he saw a certain window ablaze with sudden light, a window he knew for that of the chamber he had occupied, saw a figure outlined against this light, and the face of Sir Nevil peering out from the open casement, and beholding the expression on this face, he crouched down amid the

ivy, close, close against the wall, until he heard the casement slammed to and glancing up saw the light had vanished.

And in a while David went his way wondering more than ever.

CHAPTER XVI

Tells of a Man With a Harelip

Drowsily a-sprawl on the bench lay David to reflect upon the divers incidents of the last eventful twenty-four hours; to rejoice anew in the miracle of his restored memory; to frown at recollection of his uncle; to ponder how best he might set about the difficult task of establishing his own identity; to reflect upon the sullen-eyed, red-haired Amazon of the wood and be shocked anew by her passionate ferocity and yet to murmur her name, "Anticlea," and, finally to nod himself into blissful doze that gradually became troubled by a sound that grew to a stertorous breathing — a strange, snuffling whistle; wherefore he opened drowsy eyes and beheld a huge head stooped above him, saw a face surmounted by a weather-beaten fur cap and framed in lank hair, an unlovely face rendered yet more sinister by that blemish known as a "harelip"; and it was from this disfigured mouth that the whistling snuffle issued. As he stared, this head was withdrawn and, sitting up, David's hand instinctively sought the weapon in his pocket, for before him, leaning upon a long-barrelled gun, stood a man whose like he had never seen before. Stunted he seemed, but hugely, disproportionately broad, the head, arms and shoulders of a colossus set upon a pair of short, powerful bowed legs. The hands of this man, enormous and hairy, were crossed upon the muzzle of his long weapon, and upon these rested his clean-shaven, full-fleshed chin, while the small eyes, close-set and deep-sunken beneath a jut of shaggy brow, stared in

turn at David's new headgear, at his right hand, at his left hand, at his dusty clothes and boots and, last of all, at his face.

Now, observing this slow, patient, beast-like scrutiny, David shrank with a feeling of sudden and growing apprehension, but when he spoke his drawl was rather more pronounced than usual:

"If ever we should chance to meet again, you'd know me, I guess?"

"Ay, I shall!" snuffled the man, lisping nasally by reason of his malformed upper lip.

"Ha!" said David, beginning to frown, "And now, if you have anything particular to do, you may go and do it."

"I'm a-doin' of it!" lisped the man, staring hard at David's hands again.

"You are a gamekeeper, I think," said David, noting the velveteen jacket and stout, buttoned gaiters.

"Ar!" said the man.

"And live on the Loring estate, yonder?"

"Umph!" snuffed the man, and slid fleshy chin from hairy hands to spit resoundingly.

"Then supposing you go and — 'keep' where you belong!" suggested David.

The man snorted; his gaze wandered slowly down from David's new hat to his worn boots and he nodded in sly, furtive manner.

"Umph!" quoth he again.

"Enough, babbler!" said David, waving him off imperiously. "Your extreme verbosity distracts me. Get on your way, Chatterbox, and do your prattling elsewhere."

"You be thrange in theth parth — hey?" demanded the man suddenly.

"And you," retorted David, "you are stranger — in every part!"

"You wath up to the 'outh, yethterday — hey?"

"If you mean Loring Chase — I was."

"Why, then, I 've a letter for ye," growled the man, "leathwayth ith all according ——"

"A letter? For me?"

"If your name be David."

"I am named David."

"But you 've got an 'at."

"And what of it?"

"I were to give thith 'ere letter to a chap wi' 'is 'ead in a bandage . . . an' no one elth . . . werry particler she told me ——"

"Well, my head is bandaged . . . And who is 'she'?"

"And no 'at!" repeated the man.

"This was purchased not long ago. . . ."

"Name o' David."

"I tell you my name is David. . . . Who is 'she'?"

"David what?" demanded the man.

"Whatever you like!" said David, frowning.

"Name o' David!" murmured the keeper, as if to himself, "'ead in a bandage! And no 'at! Umph . . . you may be 'im and then again ye may be not . . . 'ows'ever — 'ere 's the writin'!" And removing his fur cap he took thence a letter and gave it to David. It bore no superscription and was sealed with a wafer, and glancing from this to the bearer, David saw him in the act of readjusting his fur cap but with his gaze still fixed upon him in that same patient, beast-like scrutiny he had already found so disturbing.

"Why do you stare so?" he questioned angrily.

"Name o' David!" muttered the keeper, "'ead in a bandage . . . but — with an 'at . . . a light grey 'at!"

"What are you waiting for?"

"The anther, for thure."

"You expect an answer, then?"

"Thath what I be waitin' for."

Hereupon David broke the wafer, unfolded the letter and read these words, written in a fine Italian hand:

"Meet me by the old Weir Mill at sunset, without fail. — ANTICLEA."

For a long moment he stared at the words, then refolding the letter, put it in his pocket.

"You may say I will be there."

"I 'm to say as you 'll be there — hey?"

"Yes!" nodded David. "Without fail."

"Without fail!" repeated the man. "Anything more?"

"No!" answered David.

"No," said the man; and shouldering his gun he turned to go, then paused to glance back.

"Well?" enquired David impatiently.

"Ar!" nodded the man, "I 'm to thay as you 'll be there . . . without fail — hey?"

"Yes."

The skin about the man's little eyes wrinkled suddenly, the thick lips parted disclosing big, yellow teeth — and as smiling thus he shambled away, David thought him a thousand times more sinister than ever.

CHAPTER XVII

How Mr. Shrig Talked with a Dead Man

Lounging back on the settle, David watched the uncouth figure out of sight, then took forth and opened the letter to read it over and over again, studying each word until, roused by a faint sound, he turned sharply and stared in dumb amazement to behold the Peddler leaning out of the window behind to peer at the open letter in his hand.

"What the — the devil ——" stammered David, flushing angrily.

"I can't eggsackly make out that 'ere last vord," said the Peddler, "but I 've got the rest, 'Meet me by the old Weir Mill at sunset vithout fail' . . . but that last vord 's a teazer! Begins vith a hay, don't it?"

"Ha!" exclaimed David, and thrusting letter into pocket he rose and clenched his fists, whereupon the Peddler closed one eye and wagged an admonishing finger:

"'Old 'ard, pal!" quoth he in a hoarse whisper. "Never go for to strike your true pal as is a vatching over you like a feyther and mother rolled into vun."

"Why, who — what do you mean?" exclaimed David staring and falling back a step. "Who — who are you?"

"Name o' Shrig, pal, in a vig and viskers. Jarsper Shrig o' Bow Street as you saved from a windictive end. You ain't forgot your pal Jarsper and Corporal Dick as keeps 'The Gun' in Gray's Inn Lane — come!"

"Why, to be sure," said David, a little breathlessly, "but ——"

"Then, Lord love you, p'raps you can i-dentify yourself at last, Jack — eh? Remember 'oo you are, how you come into the river an' all — eh?"

"Yes, my memory has come back, I remember now, thank God!"

Mr. Shrig edged himself further through the window, at the imminent risk of overbalancing, and spoke in a hoarse whisper:

"And vot might your name be now, pal?"

"I am David Loring."

"Domino!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, and smote himself resoundingly upon the crown of the weatherbeaten hat he wore; indeed, his usual serenity was so far shaken that he snapped the thumb and fingers of each hand loudly in turn; "Domino me, pal!" he repeated.

"Pray, what might you mean?" enquired David, wholly at a loss.

"I mean as Hope ain't and Certainty is! Come in, pal, along o' me vhere nobody can tvig and I'll tell ye more."

Wondering, David entered the inn and followed Mr. Shrig up a narrow stair to a small chamber under the eaves whose latticed casement afforded a wide view of meadow, woodland and undulating park where, afar, rose the gables of a noble house bowered in trees, towards which last Mr. Shrig pointed a blunt finger.

"Loring Chase!" said he; his finger hovered, following the course of a winding stream, and paused suddenly to stab at a shapeless something dim-seen amid the distant woods: "Loring Weir Mill!" he nodded.

"Well," enquired David, taking the chair his host proffered, "what have you to tell me?"

"First of all," said Mr. Shrig, seating himself upon the narrow bed, opposite David, "first of all you're dead and in your grave ——"

"Good God!" ejaculated David, starting. "Man, are you mad?"

"Leastways," continued Mr. Shrig placidly, "I have read your name on a coffin vith silver 'andles, and seed that there coffin dooly buried."

"I see!" exclaimed David indignantly, "You don't believe I am David Loring — you think I'm lying!"

"Never in this world, pal — I know you are David Loring, as I'm ready to svear. But 'oo vas the corp' they took out o' the river — the found-drowned as come ashore astarn o' Bill Bartrum's boat at nine o'clock at night on the twenty-first o' May last — five veeks ago! Since 'e vas n't you, pal, oo vos 'e . . . do ye know?"

"I think so," answered David; "yes, I think so, but I'm not sure. . . . Was he tall, slight, with dark hair?"

"Aye, pal, 'e vas!"

"And his face," continued David, "handsome, I remember, with aquiline features and dark eyes . . . yes, a handsome face."

"Why 'e 'ad n't got much face to speak on . . ." said Mr. Shrig, shaking his head, "but 'e vas buried werry elegant all at Sir Nevil's expense . . . best oak an' silver 'andles . . . ah, and an 'earse wi' plumes! A reg'lar, bang-up funeral it were and your name on the coffin ——"

"My name?" repeated David.

"As ever vas!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "'David Loring, aged twenty-four' . . . on a silver plate, werry 'andsome too!"

"But why," cried David, "why bury him under my name?"

"P'r'aps because 'e 'appened to have on 'is person papers and letters in your name ——"

"Ah — my papers!" exclaimed David. "Then perhaps he still had my mother's miniature, my ring — the serpent ring of the Lorings ——"

"And likevise a purse, pal, containing fifteen guineas, no more an' no less ——"

"Then," said David, starting to his feet, "beyond all doubt he was the man who drugged and robbed me — Joseph Masson."

"And you," nodded Mr. Shrig, "you are Sir David Loring of Loring Chase, Baronet . . . and here's my best respex, sir——"

"And here, Jasper Shrig, here is my hand and with it my gratitude for your faith in me."

"Why, sir," said Mr. Shrig, a little sheepishly, as David wrung his hand, "it ain't exactly — altogether vot you might call faith, sir."

"Then what makes you so ready to believe me, so sure I am not deceiving you?"

"Obserwation, sir, de-duction, adding a bit 'ere, substracting a bit theer . . . and then, besides, you 've got the Loring finger — two on 'em! Your little fingers is longer than ordinary folkses — like your uncle as calls hisself Sir Nevil. . . . And talkin' of him, what about that there letter and that 'ere cove as brought it — 'im in the fur cap, name o' Yaxley, Thomas Yaxley — 'im vith the gun and the 'arelip, ain't a partick'ler friend o' your'n, is 'e?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Did you 'appen to ob-serve his fambles, sir?"

"Fambles?" repeated David.

"Daddles, then — his 'ands, pal?"

"Hairy and very large, I thought."

"Large is the vord, pal, and strong — ah, prodigious! I never see a finer pair of 'ands, no," sighed Mr. Shrig, "never in all my nat'ral. And this 'ere cove took werry partick'ler notice o' your noo 'at, took werry remarkable, partick'ler notice 'e did! And vherefore, d'ye suppose, now?"

"Heaven knows!"

"Werry likely!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "But you von't go adwenturing to Loring Weir Mill at sunset, o' course?"

"And why not, pray?"

"Caution forbids, sir, Reason says NO!"

"And do you imagine I would permit such an appeal to go unanswered — under any circumstances?"

"It all depends, pal."

"On what?"

"On 'oo 'appens to do the appealin', sir. Is it an 'im or an 'er, might I ax?"

"It is a lady."

"Eggsackly!" nodded Mr. Shrig placidly. "And do you 'appen to know this 'ere lady's 'andwriting?"

"I do not."

"Ah!" murmured Mr. Shrig gently. "Under vich circumstances Caution, Reason and Prudence, j'ining in chorus, adwises you to — 'old 'ard."

"And very soon," said David, rising, "yes, in a little while it will be sunset."

"Vich means as you 're a-going?"

"This moment."

"Spoke like a true-blue Briton and bang-up sportsman, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, beaming through his false whiskers. "I 'm a-coming along wi' you, pal!"

"Indeed, I think not!" said David, becoming haughty all at once.

"Then you think wrong, sir," quoth Mr. Shrig, tucking the knobby stick under his arm, "for coming I am, pal!"

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed David, angrily. "You will have the goodness to mind your own business — and be damned!"

"And I 'm a-coming vith you, pal," continued Mr. Shrig, his beaming placidity wholly unruffled, "for two werry good reasons, first because I can show you the vay, and second because Loring Veir Mill and parts adjacent thereto ain't eggsackly 'ealthy for you, because you 'appen to be Sir David Loring o' Loring, Baronet!"

"Ah!" exclaimed David, turning to gaze towards the distant chimneys of Loring Chase. "You think there may be danger for me — yonder?"

"Ay, I do, sir!"

"Grave danger?"

"Of the werry gravest, pal."

"It looks very peaceful," said David, "very quiet, and yet . . . you suggest ——"

"That if you go a-valking there alone you 'll never come a-valking back, sir! I suggest that you 'll . . . disappear, pal . . . wanish! I suggest as there won't be no mistake about it — this time!"

"Mistake?" repeated David, wheeling suddenly to stare into Mr. Shrig's placid face. "What mistake? . . . What in God's name do you mean?"

But instead of answering, Mr. Shrig pursed his lips in their soundless whistle and shook portentous head.

"Speak, man!" cried David, grasping his arm. "What unthinkable horror is here? Speak, man, speak! What is it you suspect?"

"A precious lot!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "Ah, such a' almighty powerful, precious lot as there ain't no vord for it! And because v'y? Because suspicion ain't fact, and facts is only facts when they 're proved! And it 's proof as I 'm here a-seekin' and a-searchin' for . . . and 'ope to find vith your kind assistance."

"My assistance? But how — how — how can I help you?"

"Vich I vould remind you, sir," answered Mr. Shrig, glancing towards the western sky, "as it will be sunset werry soon!"

"I see!" said David, turning to scowl across sunny meadow and shady copse, "Yes . . . I begin to understand!"

"Then 'ow about it?" enquired Mr. Shrig at length. "'Ow about it, pal — or should I say 'sir'?"

"'Pal' will do, I guess," answered David in his

soft drawl. "And since it is proof you seek yonder, friend Jasper, come — let us do our best to find it."

"Pal," enquired Mr. Shrig as they descended the stair, "do you 'appen to be armed?"

"I have this," answered David, showing his pistol.

"Is it loaded?"

"Yes."

"That 's a pity!"

"Why so?"

"Because ve don't want no more shootin' than needful."

"There won't be," answered David, pocketing the weapon.

And so they set out for Loring Weir Mill together.

CHAPTER XVIII

Which Describes Certain Happenings at Loring Weir Mill

The sun was low as, turning from the leafy path they had been following, Mr. Shrig struck off into the denser wood, ducking under obtruding branches, edging his way through rustling underbrush, skirting impenetrable thickets, like one to whom the place was familiar.

Reaching a small glade or clearing, he halted suddenly, with one finger upraised, and stood listening intently.

"Pal," he whispered, "you ain't easy scared, are ye?"

"I hope not," answered David, also in a whisper.

"Then you von't mind if I leaves you?"

"Certainly not!" said David, a little indignantly.

"And if I tells you to lay low, you 'll — lay low . . . till I calls you?"

"Very well!"

"And you von't novise go a-letting fly vith that 'ere barker o' yourn at nobody nor nothing?"

"You may rest assured."

"Werry good, pal, then follow me — and easy does it!"

Swiftly but cautiously they crossed the glade, and so through more underbrush until borne to their ears came the soft gurgle of running water. Here Mr. Shrig halted again and, parting the leaves before him, peered through, motioning David to do the same:

"Loring Veir Mill, pal!" he whispered.

Some hundred yards or so before them, beyond a stretch of rank grass, rose a dreary ruin, its weather-worn masonry cracked and discoloured, its rotting

thatch dishevelled, its crumbling walls pierced by two slits that had once been windows, and between these a doorway that yawned upon a black interior whence stole the dismal drip of water; a desolate place of mildew and decay with something ominously sinister in its every aspect.

"Bee-ootiful!" murmured Mr. Shrig. "O, pal, did ye ever see a lov'lier spot?"

"I never saw one more evil!"

"To be sure," nodded Mr. Shrig, "bee-ootifully so! I never knowed a more likely spot for it — no, never!"

"For what?" questioned David below his breath.

"The Capital Act! . . . Murder, pal! . . . And now, I 'll trouble you for your 'at. . . . I 'm a-going to try a' old trick as has served me more nor vunce and may again. . . . So lend me your castor, pal." Wondering, David complied, and at Mr. Shrig's whispered desire stretched himself full length among the undergrowth.

"Lay low, pal, lay low!" whispered Mr. Shrig, "an' whatever 'appens, don't go for to move until you see me or hear me call . . . lay low!" Saying which, Mr. Shrig turned and was presently hid among the leaves.

Meanwhile David lay very full of wonder and a growing unease, a foreboding sense of approaching evil that seemed but the more real and imminent with every slow-passing minute; therefore he strained his ears and stared at the ruined mill with eyes of expectancy while every nerve tingled for what was to be.

Gradually the shadows deepened about him until as he stared at the ruin it seemed, little by little, to take on the form and semblance of a monstrous human head with staring eyes and mouth horribly agape; a ghastly, pallid head, surmounted by black, dishevelled hair, and which, as the light failed, grew ever the more sinister and threatening.

And now, all at once, somewhere amid the leafy shadows of the wood rose a soft and flute-like whistling, with a leafy rustling that grew slowly nearer until, peering thither, David made out the head and shoulders of a man; the sun had set by now and the shadows were creeping apace, yet there was sufficient light for David to see that this man wore a hat of grey felt with a white ribbon, a conspicuous hat that was strangely familiar. Scarcely breathing, he watched this hat approach nearer and nearer until beneath the brim he could discern hair dark and bushy. . . . Moved by sudden impulse he glanced swiftly towards the ruined mill and, catching his breath, started to his knees as from the yawning doorway that was so like a gaping mouth shot a streak of red flame. . . . As the report smote his ears, David was up, had burst from his hiding-place and, uttering a fierce, inarticulate cry, was running towards that murderous ruin. He was close upon it when two arms grappled him behind — strong arms that would not be shaken off — and Mr. Shrig's voice panted in his ear:

"'Old 'ard, pal . . . caution 's . . . the vord!"

"Good God!" he ejaculated, "What was it? What does it mean?"

"My old trick vorked, pal, that 's all . . . and you 've been an' gone an' sp'iled it ——"

"Quick!" cried David. "Loose me, we may catch the villain yet . . . in there ——"

"Not 'e, pal, not 'e . . . there 's a door t'other side — 'e 's 'opped it. You should ha' laid low and vaited for 'im to come and diskiver the body ——"

"What body — whose do you mean?"

"Why, yourn for sure — leastways what 'e took for you. Come and look." So saying Mr. Shrig led the way to where lay an object, or rather several, each of which he named as he gathered them up:

"Number vun, my staff vith a stick tied acrost it.

Number two, my coat. Number three, my neckerchief stuffed with leaves — and tore by shot, you 'll notice! Number four, my vig, likevise damaged. Number five, your 'at com-pletely sp'iled, done for and everlastingly ruinated. There ain't much left of it — eh, pal?" he enquired, turning the mangled object complacently upon his fist. "Now if so be your 'ead 'ad chanced to be inside of it 'stead o' my neckerchief stuffed wi' leaves — v'ere would you be, pal? I ask you!"

Now beholding the grey hat thus horribly torn, David grew cold with a sudden nausea.

"Under the circumstances," continued Mr. Shrig, "it 's just as well I come along wi ——"

Somewhere in the shadows behind them a dried stick cracked loudly.

"By Goles — 'e 's a-coming back!" whispered Mr. Shrig. "This vay pal, and sharp 's the vord!"

Dazed by the suddenness of it all and yielding to the urge of his companion's powerful hand, David presently found himself in the gloom of the old mill with the acrid smell of burnt powder in his nostrils; suffered himself to be led across an uneven flooring into a certain corner where the crumbling masonry showed a wide crack or fissure through which he glimpsed a stretch of grass shut in by a wilderness of tangled thickets and sombre trees.

Somewhere in the gloom behind them was the unceasing, dismal drip, drip of falling water; but what David hearkened for was the rustle of leaves, the tread of a stealthy foot amid the deepening shadows. Straining his ears thus, the wood seemed full of mysterious sounds; soft, leafy stirrings, gentle, irregular tappings, an infinity of small, unaccountable noises; with always the rippling murmur of the brook amid the shade of the alders, and the mournful, echoing drip, drip, somewhere in the gloom behind him.

All at once David started and caught his breath as, among the boskages to his left, a stick snapped again beneath a leisurely foot suddenly arrested, for there ensued a moment's utter stillness, then the leaves rustled, were parted, and Sir Nevil Loring appeared. He was shrouded in a long, dark cloak and wore a wide-eaved hat beneath which his face gleamed a pale oval in the half light as he stood, slender hands crossed upon his cane, head out-thrust while his eager gaze seemed to question every patch of shadow, every bush, every inequality of the ground until, espying thus a twisted log that lay rotting half-buried in the rank grass, he hobbled swiftly forward, peering; but being come up with it and finding it no more than what it was, he struck it passionately with his cane and turning swiftly came limping towards the mill. He was within a yard of the doorway when he halted, arrested by a crashing amid the underbrush behind him, whereupon he retraced his steps and setting a small whistle to his lips sounded thereon a shrill note. The crashing grew louder, a gun-barrel gleamed dully and the man with the harelip stepped into view, touching his fur cap to Sir Nevil as he came.

Hereupon ensued a low-voiced colloquy between them until Sir Nevil, flourishing his cane threateningly, exclaimed:

"Then find it, vermin!"

At this the keeper began questing here and there like a hound casting about for the scent; up and down and to and fro he went, his ungainly form bent double, halting now and then to peer where the shadows lay darkest, probing every bush, every adjacent thicket with the muzzle of his long gun, while Sir Nevil, leaning upon his cane, watched him with a strange intentness.

"Fool!" he cried at last. "Come here!" Unwillingly the man obeyed and, being within reach, out shot

Sir Nevil's slim, white hand to pin him by the neckcloth; holding him thus, Sir Nevil spoke and, though his voice was softly modulated, the burly fellow, for all his brutish ferocity and giant strength, shrank and quailed; then, loosing his hold, Sir Nevil struck him fiercely with his cane and, turning his back disdainfully, hobbled away. Now, as he watched him go, the man Yaxley crouched stealthily, made as if to level his gun, hesitated, and raising one huge hand shook it towards Sir Nevil's unconscious back, clawing fiercely at the air with cruel, talon-like fingers; then, spitting venomously, he shouldered his gun, slunk into the shadows, and was gone.

"And there y'are!" quoth Mr. Shrig.

David rose and, coming to the open doorway, leaned there shivering while he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Shook ye a bit, eh pal?" enquired Mr. Shrig solicitously.

"Let us go!" said David, hoarsely.

"Huming nature's a queer thing and apt to turn ugly if drove sufficient."

"Let us go!" repeated David in the same tense voice.

"Not yet, pal. Ye see Harelip is maybe on the qui-wive, as they furrineers say, and there's still light enough to shoot by — under vich circumstances Caution says: vait a bit! Look about you, pal, look about you!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, viewing their dismal surroundings in a kind of placid ecstasy. "Did huming eye ever see a sveeter spot for it, or a place more sooted to a Capital Deed? I ask ye now. Come and 'ave a look here, pal, take a peep at this!" Crossing to a dark corner, Mr. Shrig stooped and raised a trap that formed part of the flooring and displayed a well-shaft foul with slimy fungoid growths, from whose black depths rose a fetid air, with the hollow plash of dripping water far below.

"And there y'are again!" he nodded, beaming down at these grim and awful depths. "Now if somebody suddenly dead, say, or only 'arf-dead 'appened to get dropped down 'ere . . . 'e 'd wanish, eh, pal? Ah . . . and stay wanished 'till the crack o' doom!"

"Cover it up!" said David, shuddering, "Cover it up! And for the love of God . . . come away!"

CHAPTER XIX

Tells of a Gold Button

Night had fallen when, following whither his companion led, David espied a gate before them with the welcome glimmer of the high-road beyond, and instinctively hastened his steps.

But reaching the gate, Mr. Shrig paused to turn and stare back at the wood that loomed blacker than the night, a dark mystery whence, ever and anon, came desolate sighings and groanings, for the wind was rising; indeed, he seemed to find a strange allure in this forbidding prospect, unheeding David's impatience to be gone.

"Bide a bit, pal!" quoth he, settling his back more comfortably against the gate-post. "Where 's your hurry? 'T is a fine night, though it 's a-going to blow, I think. Still, Oliver 's in town, d'ye see——"

"Who is Oliver?"

"'Oliver's' flash for the moon, pal. And supper von't be ready yet, and if 't is, I ain't ready for it. . . . And though born in London, I like the country — partic'larly voods — and extry partic'larly Loring Vood — at night. And if you ax me——"

Mr. Shrig's lounging form stiffened suddenly, his right hand vanished into capacious side-pocket, and David also stared keen-eyed towards that dark wood as above the moan of rising wind came a sound of running feet, very quick and light, that sped towards them through the gloom until David could distinguish the figure of a woman, a small, girlish form,

bare-headed and with something white clasped to her bosom.

Suddenly she stopped and shrank back, uttering a pitiful, inarticulate cry of terror, whereupon David stepped forward, speaking in his soft tones:

"Pray do not be distressed, madam, indeed you have nothing to fear." And now he recognised her for the lady he had seen with Anticlea in the wood. "Can I help you, mam?" he enquired, seeing that the thing she clasped to her bosom was the limp body of a small, white dog.

"Thank you!" she panted breathlessly, "I — I want . . . Crook, sir . . . Jim Crook, please . . . he understands dogs . . . he cured my little Daphne before . . so kind and tender with animals, and my little Daphne is hurt — greatly, I fear! See . . . see how still she lies!"

"I know something of animals, lady — suffer me!" And taking the small, soft body from her arms, David carried it where the rising moon made a glory amid the gloom.

"Is she suffering — in pain, sir?"

"No lady . . . she is beyond all that."

"Ah! Do you mean . . . dead, sir?"

"Yes, lady."

"Are you sure? Quite . . . quite sure, sir?"

"Quite sure," answered David, setting the small, still creature back into the eager arms reached out for it.

The lady stood thus, silent a moment, very slender and youthful-seeming despite snow-white hair, her gentle face bowed above the little dead thing upon her bosom.

"O Nevil . . . Nevil!" she whispered at last, and sobbed once and thereafter was mute.

"Was this . . . Sir Nevil's doing, lady?" questioned David gently.

"It was my fault," she answered, "I angered him, you see!"

"And so . . . he killed your poor little dog!"

"I should not have angered him!" she repeated drearily.

"How was it done, lady?"

"With his cane, sir! Though I don't think he meant to strike so . . . very hard. . . . My poor little Daphne! You were all I had to love me, except Clea! . . . And now——" Here, choking back another sob, she looked up at David wistfully. "O, sir, you are sure — quite sure this is — death?"

"Quite sure, lady."

"Why, then I need not take her to Jim Crook after all. . . . No, I'll carry her back and . . . bury her. Thank you, sir, for your kindness to a very unhappy creature——"

"Begging your pardon, lady, but I'd like to ax you a qvestion!"

Mr. Shrig's tone was so much gentler than usual that David, turning to glance at him, saw he had a stout leathern wallet in his hand, whence he extracted a screw of paper; undoing this, he shook something into his palm and, holding it in the moonlight, David saw this object was a small, exquisitely wrought gold button:

"Begging your pardon again, lady, but have you ever 'appened to see a objec' like this any wheres, at any time?"

Slowly and unwillingly she lifted her gaze from the dead animal and, glancing at the button, nodded:

"O yes," she answered, "this is a button off his coat."

"You reckernize it, mam?"

"Yes, it is one of a set he had specially made. I should know it anywhere."

"And . . . off of whose coat did ye say, mam?"

"Why, Sir Nevil's, sir," she answered, her gaze upon her dead pet again.

"Not the bottle-green spencer, mam?"

"No, sir, the blue frock."

"Ah . . . the blue frock!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "He ain't wore the blue frock lately, 'as 'e, mam?"

"No . . . I don't think so, not since his last journey to London," she answered absently, her shapely head bowed over the small, still burden in her arms. "And now, gentlemen, if you will permit I will take my poor Daphne back. . . . I shall bury her to-night."

"Thanking you kindly, lady!" quoth Mr. Shrig, wrapping up the button and restoring it to its abiding-place. "We 'll come along wi' you if you say the vord."

"Ah no, sir — O no, no, no — please! I shall go quicker alone . . . besides, I'm used to solitude. Goodnight, sirs, goodnight!"

"Madam, one moment more, I beg!" said David, taking out and unfolding the letter signed 'Anticlea.' "Pray, is this Mistress Anticlea's writing?"

"Indeed no, sir! Clea scrawls dreadfully."

"Do you . . . know this writing, lady?"

"No-o!" she whispered in sudden panic, "no — unless —— ah, why do you question me? Let me go!" And dropping the letter, she sped away swift as she had come and was soon lost in the grim, black shadows of the wood.

"And there y'are again!" nodded Mr. Shrig, and pursing his lips he began to whistle softly a merry country jig with many elaborate trills and grace-notes, while David, picking up the letter, thrust it back into his pocket and stood lost in frowning thought until roused by his companion's touch he glanced up, frowning still:

"And he killed her little dog!" said David softly.

"And werry nat'ral too, pal — all things considered!"

"Ha — natural, d'ye say? Natural?"

"Look'ee, pal, 't is nat'ral for dogs to bite, ain't it? So ve muzzles 'em! It's nat'ral for bulls to gore, ain't it? So we rings 'em! It's nat'ral for tigers to devour huming beings, ain't it? So we hunts 'em down! Werry good! It's all quite nat'ral if you looks at it from the right p'int o' view, and there y'are!"

"Some men are not fit to live!" said David.

"No more they ain't, pal! But you can't go about a-killing of 'em, because 't would be murder and conseqvently agin' the law. Them as murders 'angs, pal, man or woman, 'igh degree or low! It's a glorious thought — that!"

"I don't know, friend Jasper," said David in his soft drawl, "I don't know but that I might kill such a man if ——"

"Not you, pal, not you! There's nothin' Capital about you. You're talkin' vild-like, an' no wonder, for your stummick's empty. There's nothing more nat'ral than to eat an' drink, so come on to supper, pal."

So they climbed the gate and side by side turned into the high-road.

And now as they went Mr. Shrig, who seemed in unusually high spirits, beguiled the way with divers snatches of song, flutelike whistlings and other lively sallies; whereas David trudged in gloomy silence, scowling up at a fugitive moon and hearkening to the desolate wail of the rising wind.

They were close upon the inn of the "Rearing Horse," whose latticed casements beamed in cheery greeting, when David halted suddenly and grasped his companion's arm:

"That button?" he demanded. "That gold button — where did you find it?"

"Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, blinking. "Never mind that now, pal, supper's a-vaiting ——"

"Where did you find it?" repeated David, his grasp tightening.

"Why, since you ax me so p'inted, sir," answered Mr. Shrig gravely, "I took it from the fist of a dead man — a murdered corp'!"

"Who — who was he?"

"The cove as come towing ashore behind Bill Bartrum's boat. The cove as had been choked to death afore 'e reached the river! The cove as everybody mistook — and buried — for you!"

Now at this David drew back a step with a strange upward motion of the arm as if warding a blow, then turning his back he stared up at the moon peeping fitfully through the flying cloud-rack. So silent he stood, so rigidly still and for so long that Mr. Shrig ventured to touch him at last:

"Pal," said he, "it's a windictive vorld, as well I know — but there's comfort in wittles! And supper should be ready . . . so come along o' Jarsper."

CHAPTER XX

Of Ben Bowker and the Man with a Harelip

Waking suddenly, David started up in bed with the sick horror of his dream still upon him; a nightmare wherein he fled from a vast pursuing shape that reached forth huge hands, with fingers crooked and hairy, to rend and tear; a monstrous thing of terror that breathed with a whistling snuffle.

Thus David, starting to elbow, stared dreadfully about him to see no more than the moonlight making a pale radiance at his narrow casement, and to hear only the riot of wind, near and far, now rising to a shrill wail, now sinking to a sobbing moan. Wherefore, muttering anathemas upon the wind, David punched his pillow and composed himself anew to slumber. But the nightmare horror persisted, nay, grew rather the more intensified. His mind became a chaos of vague fears and dreadful speculations, until at last, despairing of sleep, he groped for the candle and found he had left the tinder-box on the mantelshelf; so he arose and, having reached it, paused by the window to glance up at the sky where a rack of clouds scurried before a buffeting wind; to gaze idly away towards Loring Chase, a vague mystery of rolling meadow and dim wood, and to stare, suddenly intent, at the hedge immediately opposite his window, in whose shadow he fancied something had moved — was moving . . . and then in the darkest part of the hedge a pallid oval gleamed in the moonbeams, at sight of which David shrank appalled, his nightmare horrors clutching him anew . . . for there, peering up through a gap in the

hedge, his narrow eyes fixed in their patient, beast-like stare, his malformed mouth agape, stood the man with the harelip. David almost fancied he could hear the whistling snuffle of his breathing. . . . Then face and hedge and countryside were blotted out as a cloud obscured the moon. But David stood there, motionless in the dark, his eyes strained in the one direction; yet when at last the moon shone forth again the face had vanished.

David sat upon his bed and shivered; but, little by little, there rose within him a great and terrible anger such as he had never known in all his twenty-four years of life.

Swiftly and silently he began to dress, not troubling to light the candle, his wrath waxing ever more coldly fierce, his mind bent upon the one grim purpose.

Being dressed, he drew the pistol from beneath his pillow, took his boots beneath his arm and, softly opening the door, crept down the stairs.

The little inn seemed wrapped in slumber; not a sound reached him save the moan of wind and the loud ticking of a clock somewhere close by.

Cautiously he loosed bolt and bar, slowly and stealthily he opened the door and stepping swiftly out closed it behind him.

The moon chanced to be unclouded, but the front of the inn lay in deep shadow, and here stood David to glance swiftly about him; thus he presently espied what he sought, a distant shambling figure plain to see against the white glimmer of the road, and, drawing on his boots, set off in instant pursuit with small fear of being overheard by reason of the blusterous riot of the wind, wherefore he made good speed, keeping to the shadowy side of the road.

Often the moon was obscured by flying cloud, but David hurried on, his gaze ever upon that slouching, shambling figure so close now that he might distinguish

the fur cap, velveteen coat, and the long-barrelled gun upon his shoulder.

It was after one of these sudden eclipses that David halted, suddenly at a loss, for the moon, shining clear again, showed him a deserted road; the man in the fur cap had vanished.

But as he stood thus, peering, his keen eyes discerned a dim shape that crept before him in the ditch, and, fiercely joyful to find him so near, David whipped forth his pistol, cocking it as he did so, and stole swiftly forward, nearer and nearer, until he was so close that he could distinguish what manner of man this was and stood dumbfounded, staring in stupefied amazement; for in place of fur cap and velveteens this man wore a slouched hat and smock-frock; instead of a gun he bore a murderous-looking cudgel.

Now even as David stared thus, scarcely believing his eyes, the creeping man vanished round a sharp turn in the road; thither David followed and immediately the mystery explained itself, for he saw this: A narrow, grassy track barred by a gate that seemed familiar; within a yard of this gate shambled a figure clad in fur cap and velveteens, gun on shoulder; and between this figure and David crept the man in the smock-frock — a man who, straightening up, ran suddenly forward to leap with murderous cudgel uplifted. . . .

And then the moon was suddenly darkened, but in this darkness above the riot of wind rose sounds of desperate strife, savage voices, panting, inarticulate; crashing blows, a snuffling, gasping cry, a horrible, whistling snore, and a voice that panted in fierce exultation:

"And there's . . . for you . . . Tom Yaxley, and be damned! . . . And now for . . . t'other on ye!"

The moon shone out again to show a huge, outsprawled bulk and crouching above it one with face

haggard, pallid and smeared with blood, one who laughed, cleared the gate at a bound and, plunging into the shadows of Loring Wood, was gone.

But David had recognised this face and hurried forward shouting:

"Bowker! O, Ben Bowker!"

Then, guessing whither Bowker went and to what purpose, David stepped over Yaxley's prostrate, snoring body and, vaulting the gate in turn, set off at speed into the wood.

CHAPTER XXI

Tells How Loring Confronted Loring for the Third Time

Rushing wind that boomed and hissed amid swaying trees which, in their travail, tossed wild branches to a fitful moon whose ghostly beam, coming but to vanish again, rendered the darkness but the more profound.

Deafened by this universal uproar, lost and bewildered, David stumbled on haphazard, forcing his way through leafy boskages, blundering amid thorny tangles, floundering to and fro among mazy thickets until at last, though how he knew not, he found himself suddenly in the open. Crossing a grassy, wind-swept level, he reached a wall of no great height, and grasping the coping drew himself up. Before him was a garden, into which he dropped forthwith and, following a dim path bordered by yew trees, clipped to fantastic shapes, reached a flight of steps that brought him to a terrace beyond which loomed a great house that he knew must be Loring Chase. Approaching on this side he was screened from the buffeting wind, and paused beside a stone balustrade to glance up at the gloomy structure rising before him, a place of darkness with not so much as a glimmer of light anywhere. Wondering at its desolate aspect, he hurried, soft-treading, along the wide front and, turning a corner, halted suddenly, for before him was a window, dark like the rest, but with its lattices wide open.

So, then, despite his haste, Ben Bowker was before him! Creeping stealthily to the window, David

leaned in to peer and listen: Darkness and silence. Thus stood he a while hesitating, then, swinging himself over the sill, David stepped into the room. A small chamber in whose glimmering dusk (for the moon was partially obscured) he made out the dim shape of furniture; a tall press, a table, chairs, a cabinet direly suggestive of a crouching figure, and in one corner — an open door.

Very slowly David crossed to this door, his feet silenced by thick rugs, but all at once something caught softly at his feet, and stooping he picked up a hat, and holding it in the feeble moonlight saw it for a soft, weatherbeaten slouched hat such as waggoners might wear; dropping the hat David whipped out his pistol, staring towards the dim doorway and expecting to behold one clad in torn smock-frock. . . . So, then, Bowker was here beyond all doubt. . . . David stepped through the open doorway, and thus found himself in a carpeted passage utterly dark and narrow, for stretching his arms he could feel panelled walls to right and left. Motionless he stood, holding his breath and staring upon the dark wide-eyed and with every sense alert but with nothing to hear, not even the ticking of a clock. And little by little there grew within him a sense of coming evil, for something in the dreadful, unnatural stillness, the hushed and deadly silence of this great house, struck him as ominous, filled him with a growing expectancy of indefinable horror, and he yearned passionately to be out and away in the buffeting wind. . . . And then somewhere in the pitchy darkness before him was a faint sound that was neither of foot, nor breathing . . . a vague stirring, a soft, indescribable whisper of sound. . . .

Pistol in right hand while left felt his way along the panelling, David crept forward, slowly, silently, his every nerve strung for swift action. . . . Suddenly his guiding hand plunged into empty space . . . he

had reached the threshold of a room . . . between close-drawn curtains he sensed, rather than saw, a feeble glimmer of light. With his gaze upon this, he stood poised for a leap . . . listening, but heard only the rattle of a distant casement and the dismal moaning of the wind. And yet it seemed to him that something stirred again somewhere in the darkness . . . a breathing presence. . . . He must go forward or turn and fly. . . . David crept forward. Softly, step by step, with shaking hand outstretched before him, step by step until he stopped all at once, thrilling with horror, for his quivering fingers had touched something at last. But what? . . . Was it silk? . . . Was it fur? . . . The little, dead dog? . . . But what was it doing here? Once again he reached out tremulous fingers. . . . And then he knew. . . . Hair! God in heaven . . . a head that swayed horribly beneath his touch . . . a starched frill . . . a horrible, sticky moisture! . . .

David uttered a hoarse gasp that seemed to find an echo close by; next moment the curtains were swept aside for the moon's pallid beam to show him Anticlea, her long hair wild-tossed, her night-robe awfully bedabbled . . . and between them, lolling back in his great elbow-chair, with wide eyes glaring sightlessly at the ceiling, his pale lips curled as in sardonic mockery, and the silver hilt of a dagger gleaming among the blood-stained frills at his throat . . . Sir Nevil Loring.

CHAPTER XXII

Of Suspicion

David had a moment's consciousness of moaning wind and of that distant, rattling casement, then from the pallid lips of the shivering creature before him issued a low, inarticulate whimpering as she stared from that awful, lolling thing in the chair to those hateful blotches that fouled her white draperies; and she shuddered away, back and back until stayed by the wall; crouching there she covered her face with twitching hands, while David stood by rigid, waiting for her to scream, but presently she raised her head, and thus, for a breathless moment, they viewed each other, eye to eye:

"You?" she breathed at last. "Ah, God . . . why — why did you —— ?"

"I?" repeated David in hoarse whisper, recoiling before her look, "I? You — you think ——"

Slowly she raised white arm and pointed to his left hand, and glancing thither he saw it horribly smirched.

"Something waked me . . ." she whispered, "I was afraid . . . at last I crept down . . . in the dark . . . and then — O God ——" The words seemed to choke her and she covered her face again: "O, he was cruel . . . hateful . . . too wicked to live . . . but now —— ! Go . . . go and pray God's forgiveness — as I will! . . . Go!"

"Yes!" mumbled David, "Yes, I'll go! But first it would be better . . . if I . . . take this

with me!" And he pointed blood-stained finger to the gleaming dagger-hilt.

Now beholding this, she cried out below her breath, all strength seemed to forsake her suddenly, and she fell on her knees.

"That!" she whispered brokenly. "That — yes . . . O God, it is mine. I lost it — lost it in the wood . . . I swear I lost it in the wood! Did you — find it? Ah — did you?"

"Yes, lady — I found it . . . five minutes ago — here! And now I'll take it with me!" So saying David set his teeth and, grasping the dreadful thing, wrenched it free; holding it in shaking hand he looked about for the wherewithal to cover it. And thus he espied a crumpled sheet of paper upon the floor, and snatching it up wrapped it about the reeking steel. "As to my guilt or innocence," said he, crossing to the window, "that is between God and — you!"

"What do you mean?" she panted. "Why do you look at me so? What — do you — mean?"

"Go back to your bed," he whispered. "Burn that . . . that robe you wear, and — wait for the morning."

"Why . . . O, why do you look at me so?" she pleaded. "As if . . . Ah, God, as if ——"

But laying finger on lip, David thrust the betraying dagger into his pocket, opened the lattice, and stepped out into the clean, sweet wind.

For a moment he paused to stare vaguely around like one new-waking from a haunted slumber, then turned to be gone. But now the shock of it all, the horror, the memory of her whimpering terror, her haggard fear, the pitiful inadequacy of her words and the dreadful suspicions they engendered, sickened him to faintness; he lurched to the house wall and leaned there half-buried in rustling ivy, ages old, that grew very thick hereabouts.

The far-flung shadow of the great house lay all about him, for the moon was sinking, and yet as he leaned thus amid the shivering leaves, it seemed that, within this lengthening shadow a dim shape stole towards him, a furtive, creeping figure moving on swift and stealthy feet . . . David shifted his pistol to his left hand, watching this stealthy approach — judging his distance . . . Another twelve paces and they would be face to face . . . another three . . .

David leapt and smote, a flush hit beneath the ear and, uttering a gasp, the man went down headlong and lay with arms wide-spread; then came David to stoop and peer and recognised him for Sir Nevil's young secretary, Mr. Maulverer.

Away — away from the shadows of this accursed house fled David, swift and silent, across the terrace and down the steps, along the yew-walk and so to the wall; a leap with arms upflung, a desperate scrambling and he was astride the coping, staring back for sign of pursuit. But the great house loomed up, stark and grim against the sinking moon, with never a gleam of light and no sound to hear save that distant casement rattling to every fitful gust.

And now, as he hurried on again, his mind busied itself on a new line of thought wherein he found strange comfort; on this wise:

Maulverer! What would bring the secretary stealing abroad at such an hour? And then again (God forgive him!) he had forgotten the hat that he had found. . . . Ben Bowker's hat beyond all mistaking . . . he had been there also! Bowker, the man who had vowed to commit this very deed . . . who had waited but the opportunity! But the dagger? Her dagger? Well, she had lost it in the wood, her inadequate subterfuge had been very fact! . . . She had lost it in the wood and someone had found it. . . . The ex-convict? The secretary? Be that as it may, the

dagger had been hers and therefore must vanish. . . . But how? . . . He would throw it into the first pond he came across. . . . Yet, no! Ponds might be dragged and, besides, are apt to go dry. . . . Then in the crevice of some tree, or driven deep beneath the roots. . . . No again, for trees were always blowing down or being felled. . . . Then he must bury it somewhere. . . . And yet dogs might scratch it up, a plough discover it. Then it must be some deep body of water, a river . . . the sea. Meanwhile he must guard it night and day. . . . This dagger she had lost, this hateful thing which someone had found — and used so horribly! . . . Ay, but who?

Thus as David tramped on through the long night, by lonely field-path and winding bye-lane, heedless of direction, he was preyed upon by a thousand doubts, fears and suspicions. But of one thing he was assured, as he told himself over and over again, namely:

Whosoever had found this accursed dagger, she had most surely lost it.

CHAPTER XXIII

Describes Polly Feemus, an Heirloom

In a misty dawn, beneath the shelter of a hedge crouched David, spent with weariness, for he had travelled fast and far, his mind a prey to stark horror, for reaction had come and Murder stood before him in all its appalling hideousness. In his mind he saw again that ghastly, lifeless, lolling thing leering sardonically heavenward with sightless eyes and parted lips; again before him rose the shape of one who crouched abject amid the splendour of her veiling hair that yet might never hide the awful stains that fouled her; he seemed again to hear the misery of fear in her voice, to read it in her wide eyes. His shaking fingers crept to touch that loathly thing in his pocket . . . this murderous steel that had been — hers. Thus David crouched in the dawn, weary of body, sick of mind, full of awful doubt and a growing dread of the future; he seemed to hear again the voice of Jasper Shrig:

"Them as murders 'angs, man or voman, 'igh degree or low!"

The rope and gallows! . . . The creaking gibbet! Horror upon horror!

A bird chirped sleepily from an adjacent thicket, to be answered afar; and presently, lifting his head, David saw a soft radiance in the east flushing slowly from purple to scarlet, pink to gold; and as this radiance waxed, there arose, from dewy brake and thicket and darkling wood, a joyous chirping, a fluty piping ever sweeter, clearer, louder, until gradually the air thrilled with the ecstatic chorus; the sullen

mists thinned, rolled up and vanished, a level beam of glory shot athwart the world — and it was day.

And with day's advent David felt something of his gloomy fears lifted from him, and hearkening to the joyous carolling of the birds, hope was new-born within him. So rose he to stretch wearied limbs, to lift aching head and look up at a heaven glorious with dawn and to read there a promise of better things to be. Then, squaring his shoulders, he strode on again, keeping his face turned towards the radiant east; but in a little, finding himself utterly worn out, he seated himself beside the way and began to revolve again the problem how best to dispose of the silver-hafted dagger.

He was sitting thus, chin in hand, staring at the dusty road before him, when he heard a grind of wheels, the plodding hoof-strokes of a horse, and glancing up beheld a hooded van approaching, drawn by a great, black horse of truly heroic proportions, surprisingly sparse as to mane and tail and slim as to legs; a remarkable animal who moved with the greatest deliberation and made prodigious to-do about it, arching his neck, tossing his head and lifting his hoofs with so lofty an action that he seemed to contemn the earth he trod.

The haughty quadruped was being driven, or rather cajoled along, by a pleasant-faced, bright-eyed fellow who dangled gaitered legs and whistled cheerily until his steed, objecting to the appearance of a certain tree, lifted both fore-legs together higher than ever and seemed determined never to put them down again; whereat spake the Carter:

"Avast, Polly Feemus! Belay, Poll! Not so much on it, now! Don't forget as you ain't no colt! An' so early in the marnin', tu!" At which reproaches the sagacious animal condescended to assume his normal posture, albeit unwillingly, and coming directly

opposite David's resting-place, halted majestically and snorted.

"There's sperrit for ye!" quoth the Carter, nodding cheerily to David and pointing to his horse with the whip, "and 'im nigh as old as I be!" Here the animal in question turned to view David with a round, disparaging eye and snorted louder than ever.

"A remarkable animal!" said David, smiling.

"Why, so 'e is!" nodded the Carter, eyeing David's bandaged head and haggard looks. "But how's yourself, messmet?"

"Well enough, thank you!"

"And that ain't arl it might be, I rackon. Is your 'ead 'urted bad?"

"It is better — so much better that I can dispense with this bandage," answered David, and taking it off he cast the grimy thing disgustedly away. "I must look a miserable object!" he sighed, passing his hand across stubbly chin.

"So so!" nodded the Carter cheerfully, "I 'ave seen worse — once or twice. Come fur?"

"Yes."

"Goin' fur?"

"Anywhere."

"Why, that may be no further than the four-wents yonder or beyond the Ante-podes, which be a goodish step from 'ere. But if you'm for anywheeres Lewes way, why . . . come aboard, messmet."

"Thank you!" said David gratefully, and clambered up forthwith.

"Now then, Polly Feemus!" said the Carter, poking the horse very gently with his whip. "Stir your stumps — heave ahead, Poll!"

At which cheery admonition the haughty animal shivered disdainfully, lifted one leg very high, put it down again, lifted the other, snorted contemptuously and finally condescended to start.

"You ain't lookin' what you might call partic'lar bobbish, shipmet!" opined the Carter after they had creaked some distance.

"I need a shave!" said David.

"Which I wun't deny!" answered the Carter, passing complacent finger and thumb over his own newly shaven face. "There's Joe 'Oskins over to Glynde, agin the churchyard wall . . . easy shaving, one penny! Joe 'andles a razor very ship-shape!"

"I must go there!" said David absently.

"We're a-goin'!" answered the Carter, "di-rect, shipmet — or should I ought to make it 'sir'?" he enquired.

"Make it 'shipmate'!" answered David. "And my name is David!"

"Very good, shipmet — No, no, Poll, not this marnin'!" he broke off, for his horse had pulled up before a farmyard gate. "There's an 'orse for you, shipmet!" he exclaimed as they jogged on again. "Knows every cottage, every house and inn 'twixt 'ere and Lewes, 'e do. There ain't no animal like Poll nowheers, I du believe. Ye see, he's a sort of a family heirloom, messmet. My feyther Dan'l druv 'e afore me, and when my feyther took an' died 'e left Poll to me in 'is will, as ye might say. My feyther Dan'l arlways said as Polly Feemus were a blood 'orse, and blood begets action, and Lord! Poll's got so much action 'e can 'ardly get along fur it. But if 'e 's slow 'e's sure, and a very good 'oss 'e be — bar 'is name. But hows'ever, Polly Feemus my feyther bought 'im and Polly Feemus 'e'll die . . . Though I dunno why 'Polly' and I dunno why 'Feemus', seein' as 'e ain't a mare. I've wondered frequent what like o' woman she was — this here Polly Feemus."

Polyphemus plodded majestically on, maintaining the same deliberate pace up hill and down; stopping of his own accord at the gate of some lonely farm or

cottage bowered in creeping vines, whereupon the Carrier would descend to receive or deliver divers parcels and packages with words of cheery greeting for all and sundry, man, woman or child. Thus the heavy waggon rumbled and creaked past ancient barn and fragrant rick-yard, halting beside sunny village-greens where children ceased their play to come running with shrill acclamations for both horse and driver, followed by bustling housewives and buxom matrons full of domestic affairs to whom the Carrier delivered not only parcels but dispensed familiar gossip and local news as well; thereafter, having coaxed the haughty Polyphemus to renewed action, off and away amid cheery farewells. And so on again by tree-shaded roads and winding ways until the sun was high:

"A carrier's life seems to be a very happy one," said David at last.

"It be naun so bad, shipmet."

"Yet you have not always been a carrier, I guess? You were a sailor once, surely?"

"Ay! Run away to sea afore I knowed any better — ship's boy, cabin-boy, powder-monkey, that was me. I'm 'oping to run alongside an old shipmate o' mine 'twixt here and Lewes to-day, one o' Nelson's men — loved me like a feyther 'e did, too! Ah, many 's the rope's-ending 'e 's given me afore 'e lost 'is leg at Trafalgar — treated me like his own son did Bo'sun Jerry! 'Jim,' 'e used to say, 'Jim, consarn your young 'ide, you may be Crook by name but you 'll never be crook by natur' whiles old Jerry 's aboord to larrup ye!"

"So you are Jim Crook?"

"That 's me, messmate! Jim Crook, Carrier, Loring, Sussex — that 's all me!"

"Then you know Loring Chase?"

"I do, shipmet — enough to steer wide of it except when wanted."

"Why?"

"Because the devil lives there — though 'e goes by the name o' Sir Nevil Loring. Nobody never is over-anxious to run a-thwart his hawse, messmet, and them as does suffers for it! The wonder is someone don't — snuff him out! There's many a poor chap as would be mighty glad to scuttle and sink him to Davy Jones everlastingly, amen! . . . Ah, that they would!"

"Do you . . . know of any such?"

"Well, there be the secretary gentleman, young Mr. Mauleyverer for one — most especial! I chanced to see 'im once, standing be'ind Sir Nevil's chair 'e was, with his two fists fair shakin' wi' rage, 'is teeth showing like any vicious dog's, and in 'is eyes, shipmet — bloody murder! A sight not to be forgot, shipmet!"

Maulverer, to be sure! Maulverer who had crept so stealthily within a few yards of where it lolled staring heavenwards with its awful, dead eyes!

"Are you — often at Loring Chase?" questioned David, a little hoarsely.

"Off an' on! Ye see, I know a bit about doctoring 'osses an' sich, shipmet."

"How long has Mr. Maulverer lived there?"

"Long enough to be precious sweet on Miss 'Clea. My wife's cousin Ann is Miss 'Clea's maid, and she knows! Says as 'e be fair mad for 'er, she do."

"Ah!" said David softly.

"Ar!" nodded Jim Crook, "though 'e don't dare show it, because Sir Nevil's got 'is own eye in that quarter."

"Great God!" ejaculated David.

"Eh? What now, shipmet?"

"Sir Nevil? He — he is an old man!"

"Some men be never too old for it, messmet! 'Specially if the 'ooman be young and as good-lookin' as Miss 'Clea — poor soul, I pities 'er! Ar, I pities both on 'em — 'specially the little 'un!"

"Which?"

"The little 'un — Mrs. Belindy."

"And the other?"

"She's different, can tak' care of herself, shipmet. Why, I see her take her 'orse-whip to Sir Nevil once, ay — strike me deaf an' dumb if I did n't. Ar, and she'd ha' used it, too, but for Mrs. Belindy . . . And him a-laughing arl the time! And me 'appening to be there doctoring one o' the 'osses. O, a fierce, do-or-be-damned creetur is Miss 'Clea, fiery as 'er 'air . . . kill a man as soon as look at 'im if needful — eh? Why, what ails ye, messmet? Are ye cold? Sick?"

"No — yes!" stammered David, "I — I am a little over-tired, I think ——"

"Then you needs ale, shipmet, ale's your mark — in a tankard! Shiver my tops'ls, but I could do a pint myself! And they draws rare good stuff at a little 'ouse I knows on. Heave ahead, Poll . . . 'The Bull', Polly Feemus, the B-U- double L — Bull!" cried Mr. Crook, whereupon Polyphemus, that sagacious animal, snorted, cocked one ear and set off at such unexpected speed that David was nearly thrown from his seat.

"There's an 'oss for you!" exclaimed Mr. Crook . . . "knows 'The Bull' as well as I do! Knows as Tom Bingley as keeps 'The Bull' arlways 'as summat for 'im better nor water! A rare fav'rite is Polly Feemus arl along the road. . . . And there *is* 'The Bull' — top o' the 'ill yonder . . . and . . . why, blow my dickey if there ain't the Bo'sun, yonder — a-sitting in the ditch a-waiting for me!"

Looking whither his companion pointed, David at first could see little more than an extremely shiny glazed hat which, as he watched, was flourished above grassy ditch and from the vicinity of which arose a deep-lunged roar:

"Jimmy ahoy!"

At the which stentorian bellow the echoes awoke and Polyphemus came to an abrupt halt; hereupon up rose the Carrier in his seat to flourish whip with an answering hail of:

"Ahoy it is, Bo'sun!"

And now as they approached, up from the ditch arose a shortish, broad-shouldered, red-faced man in glazed hat and trim, square-cut blue jacket ornamented by two rows of gleaming buttons that winked jovially with his every movement; clambering forth of the ditch, with some ado, he discovered a pair of immensely wide striped trousers, one leg of which flapped about the wooden pin which did duty for the limb he had lost at Trafalgar. Bolt upright he stood, and very trig from enormous pigtail to solitary, well-polished buckled shoe, and (although distant but a bare six yards) set hand to mouth and bellowed louder than ever:

"Starboard, Jimmy, starboard! Luff 'er, lad — so! Now haul your wind and lemme come alongside."

The Carrier, having duly pulled up on the right-hand side of the road, tossed aside the reins and sprang down to grasp the Bo'sun's fist; and so they beamed upon each other and clapped each other resoundingly upon the shoulder like the old shipmates they were.

"Sink me," exclaimed the Bo'sun, "ah, you can scuttle and drownd me if ye look a day older than when I used to larrup your young 'ide. . . . If we 'ad a rope's-end handy I 'd give ye one or two for old times sake, lad!"

"And shiver me," exclaimed the Carrier, "if you don't look as staunch and seaworthy as you did that day we bore down upon they French and Spanishers — barring your larboard spar, o' course!"

"And 'oo 's your young gen'elman?" enquired the Bo'sun, touching his hat to David.

"Travellin' wi' me to Lewes, Jerry, name o' Mr.

David." Hereupon David impulsively stretched out his hand, which the Bo'sun shook heartily.

"And now," said the Bo'sun, "stand by to lend me a hand and I'll come aboard. If you give me a heave astarn, Jimmy, and the young gen'elman lends me a haul forrard, I'll make it in the twinkle of a rope's-end."

Hereupon, with much heave-ho-ing and yo-ho-ho-ing, together with sundry wild flaps and flourishes of the Bo'sun's wooden leg, the intricate evolution was happily accomplished; the puffing mariner being safe aboard between David and the Carrier, Polyphemus was induced to stir his lordly stumps and, while the vehicle creaked and rumbled upon its appointed course, ensued the following conversation:

JIM: Now as I looks at you again, Jerry, you seems a bit wore and worrited-like — you ain't gone an' married that 'ere widder yet — eh?

BO'SUN: No, Jim, no, Jimmy lad. Ye see, his honour the Cap'n (God bless 'im!) ain't got no leanings matrimonially. And if 'e ain't — I ain't! And won't!

JIM: Why not, messmet?

BO'SUN: Why not? Lord love ye, 'ow could I look arter 'im as 'e deserves to be looked arter if I took up wi' matrimony? It could n't be, Jimmy, no 'ow. Ye see, the Cap'n (God bless 'is eyes an' limbs!) takes a power o' looking arter . . . 'specially now Miss Cleone's married . . . a bit lonesome of a' evening.

JIM: Ay, ay — very nat'ral. But 'e were allus very partic'ler about 'is clothes, I mind — 'specially boots.

BO'SUN: 'E were, Jim! And 'e is! But it ain't that so much as 'is mind, Jimmy. Sich a con-founded lowness o' sperrits, messmet, as can't be explained only by one o' two things . . . either 'e 's fell in love at last — which I doubts, messmet — or he 's a-goin' to fight a dool — which God forbid!

JIM: A doo-el, Jerry? Blow my dickey! 'Oo with?

Bo'sun: Why, with that 'ere little, cursed Sir Nevil Loring. They say 'e 's a dead shot at any distance . . . and 'im sich a whipper-snapper! And the Cap'n (Lord love 'im!) was never no 'and with a pistol. . . . And him such a fine figger of a man!

Jim: And what 's Sir Nevil been a-doing of now?

Bo'sun: Lord knows! But last time as 'e bears away for town, 'e runs foul o' Her Grace of Camberhurst — though 'ow I dunno. But they 've allus 'ated each other, him and her, since they was boy and gal — ah, like p'isen! Well, the Cap'n an' me, being in town, bears up for Her Grace, as is ever our custom, d'ye see, and finds 'er in a rare tantrum, a reg'lar snorter, messmet! "A man like Nevil Loring," says she, "a foul monster like that ought to be took in 'and!" she says. "If I was a man — which thank God I 'm not," says she, "I 'd call 'im out and shoot 'im!" she says. "That misfort'nate girl," says she. "The man 's a blaster o' innercence!" says she, stamping 'er little foot and waving 'er little fist . . . and then, catching sight of me, messmet, she bears down on me, runs me aboard and bundles me out o' the room, neck an' crop, 'ide and 'air, stem and starn, as you might say, Jimmy. After which the Cap'n comes out mighty glum, come 'ome glummer, comes down 'ere glummest . . . and now there 'e is at "The Bull" along o' the young Vis-count and Mr. Barnabas, and if this don't mean a dool, I dunno nothing at all, that 's all!

Jim: A doo-el. . . . Lord save us!

Bo'sun: So ye see, Jimmy, I 'm worrited we' doo reason, messmet.

Jim: And no wonder, Jerry. There ain't nobody like the Cap'n.

Bo'sun: Nor never will be, and you can lay to that, my lad.

Here, becoming aware of David, the Bo'sun turned and laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Young sir," said he, touching the brim of his shiny hat, "you will p'r'aps ex-cuse two old shipmets a-gabbing, but we don't see each other every day."

"Why, truly!" answered David, laying his own hand upon the Bo'sun's. "Pray don't trouble about me. And, Bo'sun Jerry, it is an honour to meet a sailor who fought at Trafalgar."

The Bo'sun's eyes twinkled and he touched hat-brim again.

"Thank'ee, young sir! And Jimmy Crook were in it, too!"

"Indeed?" said David, glancing at the jovial Carrier with new interest, "were you, indeed?"

"I were!" nodded the Carrier, a little self-consciously, "though I did n't lose a leg like Jerry, nor yet an arm, like his honour the Cap'n."

"Jimmy sarved one o' the starboard quarter-deck carronades," added the Bo'sun.

"And pray what is your captain's name?" enquired David.

"Captain the Honourable John Chumley!" answered the Bo'sun, touching his hat.

"R.N.!" added the Carrier, touching his. "And 'ere we are at Glynde!" said he, as they turned into a quiet village street. "And yonder's 'The Bull' . . . and over there agin' the churchyard wall is Joe 'Oskins . . . easy shavin' . . . one penny!"

"Why, then," said David, preparing to descend, "Joe Hoskins shall earn a penny at once."

"Why, shipmet," demurred the Carrier gently, "I thought mebbe as 'ow we 'd wet our whistles first . . . companionable-like?"

"With all my heart," answered David, "and at my expense, please."

But this the Bo'sun would by no means permit, and having got himself safely to earth, led the way into a cosy tap-room full of odd nooks and corners, a homely

place presided over by a stout, motherly person whom he saluted with a gallant flourish of the glazed hat and addressed variously as his bonny lass and my dear ma'm.

"I was thinkin'," said Jim Crook as the three foaming tankards were set before them, "as a bite of bread 'n cheese would n't nowise do none on us no 'arm, p'r'aps?"

"Infinite good, rather!" said David, and ordered it forthwith. So down they sat all three, and a right joyous, hearty meal they made of it until, what with the wholesome fare and honest good-fellowship, David felt himself a new man.

At last the tankards being empty and the bread and cheese all gone, the Carrier rose to attend to his business.

"In 'arf an hour, Mus' David," said he, "we 'll be ready for to square-away for Lewes — eh, Jerry?"

"Aye, aye!" answered the Bo'sun, and touching his hat he stumped cheerily away with Crook the Carrier, leaving David to seek the much-needed ministrations of the barber.

He found Mr. Hoskins leaning dejectedly in the doorway of his cottage, whistling low and mournfully, a bony, somewhat plaintive person who, espying a customer, sighed and, beckoning ruefully, led the way into his somewhat dim and depressing operating chamber where, having tied himself up in a sprigged apron, he ceased his dirge to murmur sadly:

"Your coat an' neck-'ankerchief, sir!" David removed them and was in the act of laying coat across chair-back when his hand encountered a bulky object in the breast-pocket, whereupon he started, frowned and put on his coat again immediately; at which the dejected barber seemed to take mournful umbrage.

"Your garmink will be quite safe 'ere, sir," he sighed plaintively, "I ain't no bandite, bandyleerio, nor yet

a briggin. . . . Owing to a weakness o' my innards I'm only a barber and, wherefore and therefore, not in the 'abit o' committin' larceny pettit or otherwise."

"Quite so!" nodded David gravely, "but I prefer to wear my coat, thank you."

So David was shaved, his hair trimmed; and viewing himself thereafter in the small mirror, he found his appearance sufficiently improved.

Mr. Hoskins received his guerdon with a doleful murmur of thanks and David went forth into the sunshine. But now, by reason of the hateful thing in his pocket, the day had lost its charm and he walked with head down-bent. Busied thus with troubled thought he returned to the inn, but seeing no sign of Jim Crook or the Bo'sun, strolled into the yard, where stood a magnificently appointed and very dusty carriage from which the ostlers were unharnessing a pair of foam-spattered horses whose sweating flanks and panting distress told of a long journey at furious speed.

"Crool, I calls it!" quoth an ostler.

"Ar," nodded one in a smart, albeit dusty livery, flicking smart cockaded hat with a handkerchief of vivid hue, "if they 'ad n't been blood 'osses they 'd ha' been dead 'osses ten mile back!"

"And no error!" added a groom, stooping to dust his smart top-boots. "But vhen 'er Grice says 'quick' —it 's to be danged quick, neck or nothing!"

David sauntered on and presently found himself in a small paddock where ducks waddled and quacked, an aged horse cropped contentedly and hens clucked comfortably about a huge hayrick that soared aloft filling the air with fragrance; now against this rick stood a ladder most invitingly. The place was quiet and secluded, and what place better for thought than a hayrick? David mounted forthwith and lying outstretched, secure from espial or interruption, began

once more to revolve the problem of where and how he might do away with the dagger.

Borne to him upon the stilly air came the good, homely sounds of the sleepy village; a murmur of friendly voices, the snort of a horse, a faint lowing of cows from remote pastures, the rattle of chain and clank of bucket where someone drew water from a well. . . . David sat up suddenly. . . .

The Carrier and Bo'sun Jerry would be waiting him by now. . . . David sighed and moved only that he might peer from the rick. . . . Yes, there was the gleam of the Bo'sun's hat in the yard. . . . Another moment and his hoarse bellow reached David's ears, but he never stirred. And thus after some while he heard afar the grind of wheels, the hoof-strokes of a horse so extremely deliberate that he knew could be none other than Polyphemus plodding majestically Lewes-wards. Then David sighed and closed his eyes; very soon he must be trudging the roads again, but for the present he would take his ease. . . . For he knew at last where he would hide the dagger. . . . The one and only place where he might bury it and its incriminating evidence from the light of day — for ever.

CHAPTER XXIV

In Which the Reader Will Find Mention of Two Old Friends

"Aha, John Chumley . . . stay, Jack! For shame, John!"

David started, crawled to the edge of the rick and peered over. Immediately below him was a one-armed man in the very act of climbing the ladder, a tall, dignified gentleman, despite his empty sleeve, clad in a blue coat of excellent cut and fit, and who, as David watched, descended from the ladder and, turning, removed his curly-brimmed hat and bowed ceremoniously to a very small personage whose small head was tied up in a vast bonnet, whose small mittened hands were clenched into diminutive fists with which she smote the air fiercely one after the other, halting at the same moment the better to stamp small, sandalled foot.

"So, Captain Chumley!" cried she, with a flash of bright eyes from the depths of her bonnet. "So, sir, you'd run away, would you? . . . Not a word, John! You'd actually dare to avoid me, would you? . . . Hold your tongue, sir! And to climb a stack, sir — at your time o' life! So undignified in a middle-aged gentleman — so cowardly! For shame, John! What d'ye mean by it?"

"Why, your Grace," began the Captain mildly, "I merely ——"

"Tush, sir! Here have I driven hither at breakneck speed, here have I been bumped and bruised and jogged

and jolted for miles, here have I nearly killed my poor horses for your unworthy sake and you instantly climb a haystack at sight of me — ungrateful wretch!"

"But, my dear Duchess, if you will permit me one word, I say if I may be allowed one ob ——"

"Pray, what are you doing here, in the first place, John?"

"My dear creature, for the matter o' that, I say as regards this little excursion of mine, I can explain in ——"

"Little excursion, sir!" repeated the small Duchess, with another stamp of foot and flourish of fist. "Little excursion, indeed! O, Jack Chumley, what damnable folly would you commit?"

"Indeed, mam, since you ask me I hasten to reassure you ——"

"Fiddlesticks, sir! You are here to fight. . . . Silence, John! Moved by foolish, wicked, thoughtless words of mine, you are here to fight a miserable, little, devilish creature who will kill you, Jack, kill you as sure as death . . . and delight to do it! He will kill you, Jack Chumley!"

"Not necessarily, mam!" answered the Captain reassuringly, "so pray do not distress yourself, my dear soul."

"And you with but one arm, John!" she sighed, laying one hand upon his empty sleeve.

"So much the less to shoot at!" he retorted, and taking her hand in his, he bowed his grey head above it gallantly; "Come, let us go in."

"He would kill you, John!" she repeated. "So I am here to take you home with me."

"Impossible, mam, absolutely! I say, not to be thought on for one moment — the — the matter has gone too far ——"

"Then it shall go no farther, sir!"

"The meeting must take place, Duchess, there is

positively, I say, mam, there is no possibility of avoiding it, for, d'ye see ——"

"This is why you will avoid it — at once, John Chumley!"

"Sir Nevil received my note two hours ago; I am expecting his answer or himself at any moment. . . . And hence, mam, my honour . . . d'ye see, mam ——"

"Your honour, indeed! Say your death, rather! O, John, John, don't blather. . . . I say this hateful thing shall not be. . . . I am determined on't! And, God forgive me, 't was my doing . . . though indeed, John Chumley, you are such a bull-at-a-gate, such a wild, impetuous youth, such a desperate, reckless, hot-headed boy — Ah, what is that?" she cried suddenly, for the village street echoed to the wild gallop of hoofs, drawing rapidly nearer and louder until they clattered upon the cobbles of the inn-yard and stopped.

"Who — who comes, John?" she questioned sharply, clutching at the Captain's empty sleeve.

"Probably Sir Nevil's answer, mam. Shall we go and see?"

"No, John — summon him here! Heavens, what a clatter of voices! Pray see what's amiss, John!" Obediently the Captain strode off towards the yard, but ere he reached it a man came hurrying to meet him who spoke rapidly in low tones. "What is it, sir, what is it? cried the Duchess. "Let the man come here, sir — Well, what's the matter?"

"Why, it seems, mam ——" the Captain took off his hat and stood turning it in his hand, staring vaguely into the distance. "It seems, mam," he repeated, "it seems that . . . in short, mam, I — the meeting won't take place . . . by God, mam ——" The Captain made a helpless little gesture with the hat he held and was silent.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the Duchess, then, turning on the man, she stabbed at him with small, imperious

finger: "You!" she commanded, "Speak! What 's the matter?"

"Sir Nevil Loring is dead, mam!"

The slender finger quivered but, imperious still, waved the man to be gone.

"Dead!" repeated the Captain, when they were alone.

"I rejoice to hear it!" said the Duchess. "Here was the hand of God!"

"But . . . O mam, he was . . . murdered, mam . . . last night! Murdered!"

"And time, too, John! . . . O, do not look for sympathy from me!"

"But, mam ——"

"Bah, John! Don't look so virtuously shocked. . . . I knew Nevil from childhood and never any good of him . . . a cruel, selfish boy — a heartless man, a small monster who invited his fate — a wretch who ——"

"Madam . . . at the least he is dead!"

"Indeed, and so is his nephew, it seems, poor Humphrey's son. Consequently one naturally wonders what will become of the property. . . . Of course there is that poor simpleton, Belinda Chalmers . . . caused such a scandal twenty years ago, you 'll remember! . . . But she don't count — no, if he has troubled to make a will 't will be either in favour of some groom or footman or the girl, his protégée — a handsome young animal, godless as a Caribbee Indian! You saw her the last time we ventured to Loring, six months ago, in the matter of poor Humphrey's letter. You remember the creature, John?"

"Who, mam?"

"Why, the girl . . . Anticlea, as pagan as her name . . . a bold-eyed minx utterly wild and lawless! Yet how should she be other with such upbringing. And he took her off the parish as a baby . . . a nameless beggar's brat ——"

"This at least was generous in him, Duchess."

"Don't be a sentimental fool, John! The cold-hearted fiend could n't be generous — and was n't. Never did a worthy act! Used to torment cats as a boy, I remember! Used to torment this child simply to enjoy her wild furies! Indeed, the best thing Nevil Loring ever did was to become a ghost — and he could n't do even that decently it seems! . . . And to-day, thanks to him, this girl is a fierce, sullen thing — an audacious, sharp-tongued, passionate creature — altogether detestable!"

"Unhappy girl!" said the Captain.

"Sullen baggage!" snorted the Duchess.

"Poor lonely soul!" said the Captain.

"A red-haired, ranting virago, sir!" quoth the Duchess. "They say she actually and positively assaulted the village beadle once . . . in the churchyard! On a Sunday!"

"Hum!" murmured the Captain.

"The beadle probably deserved it, sir! However, John, I intend to offer the child my protection — immediately!"

"Good God, mam!" ejaculated the Captain.

"I am a lonely old woman, Jack Chumley. Cleone has her Barnabas and her baby! Besides, viragos appeal to me — especially young ones!"

"But . . . God bless my soul," exclaimed the Captain, "I say b' Gad, mam ——"

"So I shall run down to Loring Chase this afternoon and you shall escort me, John."

"Heaven forbid, mam! I say not even for ——"

"So the matter is settled. Your arm, John, pray!"

So the Captain bowed, gave his arm, and side by side they returned to the inn.

And after some while David got him down from the rick and, avoiding the inn-yard, set off upon his mission.

CHAPTER XXV

Some Description of Red Hair and Tears

Four o'clock had chimed from distant church-tower as David, turning from the hot and dusty high-road, mounted a stile and sat there to rest, for he was painfully tired; the bodily hardship and mental stress he had endured of late had sapped strength and vitality. Thus he sat viewing the rolling, wooded prospect before him with lack-lustre eyes and pondering what explanation he should offer Mr. Shrig for his so sudden absence. In the midst of which, his thoughts must go wandering off to Anticlea — this strange, ungentle creature so infinitely below all his youthful ideals of beauty and womanly perfection . . . "a red-haired, ranting virago!" . . . And he detested red hair! . . . "One who would, if needful, kill a man as soon as look at him!" And in his pocket that ghastly dagger of hers. He remembered how she had shown it to him in the wood, and he (God forgive him!) had commented upon its deadliness "if properly used" . . . Well, it had been properly used!

Sighing, he got down from the stile and went his way slow-footed, following a narrow field-path which led across a meadow to lose itself finally in a little copse; but preferring the open, he left this path and skirted the wood, his feet soft-falling upon tender, lush grass. . . . "A fierce, sullen, passionate creature!" And — with red hair! . . .

David halted suddenly and caught his breath.

She lay outstretched before him, head pillowed upon her arm, gazing up into the blue serenity of heaven;

and there flashed upon him the sudden knowledge of her beauty; the dazzling whiteness of her throat, the voluptuous contours of rounded bosom and broad hip, the long, graceful line of shapely limbs — and therewithal a careless abandon in her pose, a lithe vigour and strength that offended him: "A handsome young animal" in very truth!

Presently, turning her head, she saw him and, sitting up with an effortless ease, frowned at him:

"What do you want?" she demanded angrily, not recognising him at first, and then as David bowed: "Oh, it's — only you!"

"Only me, lady."

"But you are different . . . changed, surely?"

"Merely barbered, mam."

"Where are you going?"

"To Loring."

"Why? What for? Why there?" she questioned sharply.

"For sufficient reason, lady."

"Then you are a fool!"

"I begin to think I am, lady."

"Yes, a reckless fool!" she repeated. "You might have reached London by now — or the coast."

"That's so, I guess, mam!" he nodded. "But then I've no desire for London — or the coast."

"You left your hat behind you — last night."

"Ay!" said David starting. "To be sure . . . I had forgotten the hat!"

"What brought you there last night . . . in the very house . . . at such an hour?" she questioned, sinking her voice to a whisper.

"A foolish impulse!" he answered, "I came hoping to prevent . . . what happened ——"

"To prevent?" she repeated, fiercely scornful.

"Yes, mam!" he answered gravely, "I had heard his life threatened and ——"

"Ah!" she cried, recoiling, "You mean . . . by me . . . in the wood yesterday?"

"Not you, lady."

"Then who . . . who else?"

"I cannot tell you, lady."

"You must! You shall!" she cried passionately. "Was it . . . was it Eustace Maulverer?"

"No, lady."

"O, but you are screening someone . . . sheltering somebody."

"That is why I took the dagger!" said David gently. In one movement, as it seemed, she was on her feet.

"O, hateful!" she cried, "You . . . you dare suggest——"

"Nothing, lady!" he sighed. "Only I would to God you had been safe asleep in your bed——"

"Instead of which I caught — you!" she retorted, staring at him eye to eye.

"You did, lady!"

"You were stooping above him when I drew the curtain."

"True, mam!"

"Then," said she, catching up the cloak and bundle that lay at her feet, "you were wiser to go your way and let me go mine."

"Surely, mam! And my way is to Loring; pray where is yours?"

"As far from the hateful place as possible!"

"Ah," said David. "You mean that you are quitting Loring — for good?"

"For ever!" she cried passionately. "I am free at last, thank God, and pray never to see the hateful place again."

"But . . . but," stammered David, "to leave just now, at such a time, and in such a manner, is utter madness!"

"Mad or no, I'm going!"

"But think, lady, think!" he pleaded. "You would be followed, sought for, tracked! Your name would become a byword, a mark for every vile suspicion ——"

"So much the better for — the guilty one!" she retorted, staring at him beneath sullen brows.

"They would hunt you . . . hound you down ——"

"What of it?" she cried wildly. "I tell you if they caught and imprisoned me I should still be free, for — he is dead ——"

"Hush, lady, hush! And pray reflect. . . . If you run off thus ——"

"Stand aside!" said she imperiously.

"No!" answered David, shaking his head. "Under the circumstances, you will, I think, return to your duty."

"What duty?"

"The duty you owe to your own good name."

"Will you let me pass?"

"No, mam ——"

David reeled backwards before her pantherine leap; then, grasping him in fierce hands, she whirled him aside with a strength so altogether unexpected that he staggered and nearly fell.

"Would you dare?" she cried, "Would you dare? Do you think you can stay me — you?"

"Why, surely, mam!" he answered, grim-lipped.

But as he spoke she was on him again and, though now he was prepared, twice she swung him from his feet so that he was forced to struggle with her in self-defence, a sordid grappling that revolted him; at last, by means of an old wrestling trick, he broke her hold . . . and she was down . . . a wild, panting, dishevelled creature, scowling up at him through the disorder of her tangled hair.

David stood breathless, staring down at her with horrified eyes:

"God in heaven!" he gasped, "What have you made me do?"

"Beast!" she cried. Damned coward! Loathsome brute!"

"Lady!" panted David, bowing profoundly, "your language is unworthy and . . . offends me as . . . much as your red hair . . . which is all . . . about your ears . . . extremely unbecoming!"

At this she flamed anew, lashing him with tongue so unrestrained as shamed him for her sake. None the less she made haste to order her rumpled garments and wind up the disordered tangles of her hair.

"And now," said David at last, "if you are quite ready, I will escort you back home."

"Then you shall drag me!" said she sullenly.

"Indeed no!" he answered. "We have had enough of vulgar scuffling! Pray will you not rise, mam?"

"No!"

"Very well," he sighed, seating himself opposite her, "I will sit here and talk to you. And first pray——"

"Fool!" said she in bitter contempt. "Your freedom — your life is in my power!"

"Is it so, lady?"

"Do you doubt it, fool? If you force me to go back to Loring . . . well, suppose I tell where you were last night?"

"I should probably be arrested, mam."

"Then begone while you may!"

"Impossible, mam!"

"Then don't dare to hinder me!" and she made to rise, but David's outstretched hand stayed her.

"O pray," he sighed, "attempt no more violence, it shall not serve you and is very undignified for you and me. Try to realise, mam, that brutal strength in a woman and a coarse tongue are infinitely abhorrent——"

"Ah!" cried she, between white teeth, "I shall be glad — yes, I shall rejoice to send you to prison!"

"And Nature," continued David, "Nature formed you woman——"

"Damn Nature!" she cried wildly. "I would to God I were a man! I feel like a man . . . I think like a man . . . I am stronger than most men. . . . I would to God——"

"Stop!" cried David, shocked and angry. "You do but shame your womanhood and . . ." he paused, "and now will you suffer me to see you safely back to Loring Chase?"

"No!" cried she, with a passionate spurning gesture of her foot, "I hate the place!"

"You were not happy there?" he questioned more gently.

"Happy?" she repeated in bitter mockery. "It was worse than death!"

"Then why — why did you not run away before?"

"I stayed for my poor B'lindy's sake. . . . But to-day he is dead and I am free. . . . I live at last!"

"Yes, but Mrs. Belinda will be anxious and very lonely without you, won't she?"

Anticlea's head drooped and she was silent awhile:

"O, I am a vile, selfish beast!" said she at last.

"Indeed I think you will be if——"

"Do you indeed, sir! Then pray keep your hateful thoughts to yourself."

"Yes, mam!" he answered.

Now here, to his wonder, she began to laugh, and then, to his dismay, she began to weep passionately.

"Don't!" he pleaded, "O pray don't! O child, for Heaven's sake don't cry!"

But, at this, she sank face down upon the grass and lay abandoned to her grief, her whole body shaken by wild sobs.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed David, glancing help-

lessly about; then, kneeling beside her, he laid his hand upon her shoulder, her shining hair, and begged her to be comforted.

"I am so lonely!" she sobbed. "So . . . very lonely and . . . tired!"

"Why, so am I, child!" he answered gently, "very weary and utterly solitary . . . so pray will you not be my friend, Anticlea, and suffer me to be yours——"

"And . . . my hair is . . . red!" she sobbed.

"But very long and silky!" he answered.

"And . . . red hair is . . . detestable!"

"Not . . . not always!" he answered; "I mean . . . only sometimes."

Here she turned her head to glance up at him tearfully over her shoulder:

"What do you mean?" she enquired, with strange humility.

"I mean that . . . some people might think red hair the . . . the loveliest in the world."

"What people?"

"People of . . . of a matured judgment."

In a little she sat up, frowning.

"I despise women that weep!" said she, drying her tears contemptuously.

"Surely it is very — feminine?" he suggested.

"That's why I despise myself . . . and it is all your fault! But then I . . . abominate red hair — especially mine, and this is not your fault."

"Then," said David gravely, "as a mark of your forgiveness, and for the sake of poor Mrs. Belinda, let me take you back home."

"Very well!" sighed Anticlea, "Yes, I will go back . . . for my B'lindy's sake."

"And the sake of . . . our friendship?" he questioned, a little diffidently, and reached out his hand. For a moment she hesitated, then, warm and soft and strong, her fingers clasped his; but in this same mo-

ment a shadow fell between them and, turning, David came face to face with Mr. Maulverer, whose eyes flashed with a look of instantaneous recognition. Sedate and impassive as ever, Mr. Maulverer did not glare or frown or clench his fists, yet in the droop of his eyelids, the quivering dilation of delicate nostril and every line of his supple, stately figure, David read a menace.

CHAPTER XXVI

Telleth How and Where David Hid the Dagger

"I fear I intrude!" said Mr. Maulverer, removing his hat and bowing to Anticlea.

"You do!" she answered ungraciously, while he watched her beneath drooping lids.

"It is my regret!" said he softly and with an almost imperceptible shrug.

"Pray, what do you want?" she demanded.

"You!" he answered in dull, repressed tone. "You have been missed! The Law Officer has enquired for you repeatedly and Mrs. Chalmers is quite distraught owing to your absence . . . your somewhat — unexpected departure."

"I came out for — for a walk!" said she suddenly.

"With your cloak . . . and a bundle!" he smiled, with another slight shrug. "Permit me to carry them ——"

"No!" said Anticlea haughtily. "You will return, if you please, and tell B'lindy I am taking the air. And if the officer — that officious brute — wants me, let him come and find me."

"And your bundle?" suggesed Mr. Maulverer.

"I can carry it myself."

"Also you have an escort, I see."

"You may go!" she cried angrily. "Have the goodness to leave me — at once, Maulverer!"

"Assuredly!" he answered, "though, ere I do so, my sense of duty compels me to . . . warn you ——"

"What do you mean?" she questioned a little

breathlessly, and glancing about her in sudden apprehension.

"No, no!" said he gently. "Do not distress yourself, there is no pursuit — yet! I would simply warn you, as in duty bound, that I have seen this" — Mr. Maulverer paused momentarily to glance towards David — "this gentleman before!"

Anticlea turned her back upon the speaker and began to pluck at the grass with petulant fingers.

"What business is this . . . of mine?" she enquired in the same breathless manner.

"This I must leave you to judge for yourself, Miss Anticlea! But I saw this gentleman in Sir Nevil's room the day before yesterday afternoon ——"

Anticlea laughed suddenly:

"The day before yesterday!" she repeated, and tossed a handful of grass into the air. "O, be off to your pens and ink, Maulverer!" she cried. "What do I care what you did or whom you saw . . . the day before yesterday?"

Mr. Maulverer seemed as impassive as ever, only his clean-cut lips curved in a faint smile: beholding which smile David glanced at the angle of his jaw, immediately above his high stock, and was not sorry to behold there a slight swelling and discoloration.

"The day before yesterday!" repeated Mr. Maulverer in his hushed, repressed manner, "on which occasion Sir Nevil made a very remarkable statement concerning himself and this gentleman, a statement which, in view of the late dreadful crime, I feel it incumbent upon me to relate to you, leaving it to your judgment whether I ought to publish the fact to . . . others."

Anticlea was silent, but David saw her fingers were plucking and tearing at the grass again.

"Well?" said she at last, without glancing up.

"Briefly, then," continued Mr. Maulverer, "I chanced, on the afternoon in question, to enter Sir

Nevil's room unexpectedly and surprised this gentleman standing before Sir Nevil in a very threatening posture with a pistol in his hand. Seeing me, Sir Nevil beckoned me near and 'Maulverer,' said he, 'if any harm should befall me . . . at any time, or anywhere . . . pray take particular notice of this person that you may know exactly what kind of man my murderer is!'"

Anticlea shivered slightly, and David saw her trembling fingers slowly clench themselves. And then Mr. Maulverer spoke again, addressing David for the first time:

"I am exact, I think, sir?" he enquired. "Those were Sir Nevil's actual words, or very nearly so?"

"Sir," answered David, "You have a very faithful memory."

"Now shall I carry your bundle, Anticlea?" enquired Mr. Maulverer, addressing her shapely back.

"No!" she answered, without looking round. "Leave me — at once! Tell B'lindy I am here . . . go!"

"And the . . . Bow Street Officer — 'That officious brute'? On the whole I think perhaps you should permit me to carry your bundle."

"Very well!" said Anticlea, and rose to her feet. Then, stepping forward, Mr. Maulverer stooped for the bundle in question, but David was before him; setting it lightly beyond his reach, he bowed:

"Sir," said he, "you may inform all and sundry, or whomsoever it may concern, that I may be found at 'The Rearing Horse' for some days to come."

Mr. Maulverer frowned slightly, glanced from David's alert figure to the silent Anticlea and seemed to ponder, then he bowed and, without another word, turned and left them.

"Quick!" she whispered, as soon as he was out of earshot. "Quick . . . into the wood! You can hide safely there till dark."

"That would be the act of a guilty rogue!" said David.

"But . . . but," she stammered, looking at him with great troubled eyes, "you . . . O, are you mad — are you mad? You heard what he said? O, hurry . . . there, they are coming! Hurry, I beg — I implore you, hide yourself . . . for my sake if not for your own! For the sake of . . . our friendship——"

Stirred by this passionate appeal, David suffered his better judgment to be overruled and stepped into the wood; but being there, screened by the dense leafage, he paused irresolute and, glancing back, saw the gleam of Mrs. Belinda's white gown, heard her rapturous cry of welcome as she ran to greet Anticlea, and then Mr. Maulverer's leisured tones:

"Your cavalier seems to have deserted you, Miss Anticlea, which was perhaps wise in him . . . under the circumstances!"

David stood hesitating in angry mortification, greatly minded to go back; but remembering for what purpose he had returned to Loring, he checked the impulse and hasted upon his errand.

Very soon he saw before him the desolate ruin of Loring Weir Mill, its mouldering decay the more evident in the setting sun's level rays, a place which, to him, breathed of things corrupt, chilling him anew with that indefinable sense of brooding evil.

A bird called plaintively afar, the stream whispered stealthily among the alders, but except for this no sound broke the mournful silence.

Eager to be done with the place and away, he hurried across the stretch of rank grass, starting suddenly from that rotting log which, at a casual glance, seemed so horribly like a dead and writhen human form.

Hastening on again, he entered the yawning doorway of the mill and, being within its chill shadow, drew

forth that hateful dagger, its murderous tell-tale steel mercifully hidden in the paper twisted (and horribly glued now) fast about it. With this dreadful thing in his hand he crept to a certain gloomy corner and stooping, raised the trap, disclosing that dark chasm whence rose a fetid air with the ghastly drip-drip of falling water far below.

Down . . . down into those awful depths David cast the tell-tale dagger and waited to hear the splash of its fall; waited thus with breath in check until it burst from him in a groan, for no sound reached him but the faint, steady drip-drip of water.

Chilled with a dreadful amazement, sweating with an ever-growing horror, David crouched to peer down into that pit of noisome blackness, listening . . . listening for the splash that never came. . . . And then, all at once, up from that evil gloom, plain to hear above the dripping water, rose a sound horridly familiar . . . the soft whistling snuffle of a deep-drawn breath: and, recognising this sound, David shrank away, letting fall the trap with a crash that echoed dismally in his ears as he hurried from that evil place.

CHAPTER XXVII

Concerning a Tendril of Red-gold Hair

"The Rearing Horse" Inn, as already set forth, was a quiet, rambling hostel, of no great size, set well back from the road upon a gentle eminence; a sleepy, restful place that seemed to drowse in the shade of trees. Upon the one side lay the stable yard smelling pleasantly of hay and horses, yet whose peace was seldom troubled by the ring of hoofs; upon the other side was a garden, where fruit trees flourished and flowers rioted, shut off from the road by a quickset. In a corner of this garden, pleasantly remote and half-buried in climbing roses, stood a small arbour whence one might command a view of the garden, the inn, the winding road and the wooded country beyond, a pleasing landscape stretching away, mile on mile, to the bold swell of Firle Beacon and the purple Downs afar.

Within this secluded bower, a radiant sunset making a glory all about him, sat Mr. Shrig lost in such profound excogitation that the clay pipe between his fingers was cold long since.

From famous wide-brimmed hat to square-toed top-boots Mr. Shrig was his outer self again. Between the knees of his cords leaned the knotted stick, his square, rosy face was smooth and innocent of whisker; but the erstwhile placid brow of Mr. Shrig was furrowed with care; his eyes, heedless of the beauties of earth and sky, were focussed pertinaciously on the toe of his boot; his clean-shaven lips had pursed themselves in their soundless whistle. At last he sighed, shook his head and called, though not very loudly:

"O, Dan'l!"

Out from the tap and up flower-bordered path trotted a small, meek-looking man with colourless eyes and hay-like whiskers who, reaching Mr. Shrig, blinked mildly.

"Wot now, Jarsper?" he enquired.

"If," said Mr. Shrig, eyeing the toe of his boot again, "if Mr. Gillespie got my message in time for 'im to ketch the fast mail, 'e should reach Lewes to-night — eh, Dan'l?"

"True enough, Jarsper."

"V'y, then, 'ire an 'oss and gig, Dan'l — you can get one from Jim Crook the Carrier — and fetch Mr. Gillespie 'ere to me."

"Right y'are, Jarsper! Anything more?"

"Ah! Tell landlord Tom to draw me a pint of old! For when the 'eart of man is bowed down, Dan'l, there's nothing . . . except the Corporal's Vun and Only . . . as can elewate it like a pint of old ale. An' my 'eart, Dan'l, is bowed uncommon low."

"Why, this ain't like you, Jarsper."

"No more it ain't, Dan'l, but this 'ere murder's shook me, upset all my calculations, d'ye see. . . . Here vas me, only day before yesterday arternoon — afore Sir Nevil took and got 'isself murdered, d'ye see — vith my case all complete, my proofs (dammem!) all in order — sarcumstantial ewidence enough to 'ang a dozen men . . . the rope rove, Dan'l, the gallers waitin' . . . An' now — to 'ave 'im snatched from under my werry famble, as ye might say, by the daddle o' Death! 'Eart-breakin' is the only vord for it, Dan'l, 'eart-breakin'!"

"True for you, Jarsper, 'e ought to 'ave swung; ay, 'e ought to ha' been 'topped'!" nodded the little man mildly. "It's a pity — a great pity, and 'ard on you, but Fate was agin' ye . . . A pint of 'old' eh, Jarsper?" Here, chancing to lift his sombre gaze,

Mr. Shrig espied one approaching whose long, swift strides bespoke alike vigorous youth and a mind perturbed.

"Two pints!" said Mr. Shrig. "And hist, Dan'l, I vants a vord wi' that theer young cove, so stay round a bit, see as nobody gets a chance to listen nor yet to peep or pry."

"Right y'are, Jarsper!" And the meek-seeming Dan'l trotted off obediently into the tap, whence he very presently reappeared, a pint pot in either hand: thereafter, at a nod from Mr. Shrig, he vanished. Thus, as David approached he beheld a knotted stick flourished aloft to beckon him on, and, drawing near the flowery arbour, beheld Mr. Shrig therein flanked by foaming tankards.

"Well," said he, grasping Mr. Shrig's extended hand, "here I am back again, Jasper."

"And 'ere 's me an' a pint of old to welcome ye, pal. Sit down and drink 'earty. . . . 'ere 's best respex!"

David drank thirstily, nodded gratefully and, resting the half-emptied flagon on his knee, leaned back and turned to his companion:

"I guess you 'll be wondering where I 've been?" he began a little diffidently.

"No," answered Mr. Shrig, shaking placid head, "I only vonders v'y you went."

David sat up and stared:

"Ha . . . then you . . . know——?"

"Ay, I know," said Mr. Shrig, sinking his voice, "that you vas at Loring Chase last night!"

"How—how do you know this?" questioned David, slopping his ale in amazement. "Who told you?"

"Your boots, pal. . . . An' mind your ale!"

"My boots?" repeated David, staring down at them.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, "your right boot 'as only 'alf a sole an' your left has an 'ole in it."

"True!" said David, viewing the sole of each boot in turn. "But how——?"

"Obserwation, pal! Last night you clumb a wall and dropped into soft ground, leaving werry good impressions. . . . Quite simple, d'ye see. Now, 'aving got so fur, 't is only to be expected as you went a bit further?" Here Mr. Shrig's keen gaze focussed itself in the vicinity of David's ankle.

"I did!"

"As fur as . . . the 'ouse, pal?" Mr. Shrig's gaze crept up to David's knee.

"Yes."

"Into the 'ouse, p'r'aps?" Mr. Shrig's gaze stole to the top button of David's waistcoat.

"Yes, Jasper."

"Then, maybe you saw . . . summat?"

"I found Sir Nevil . . . in his chair . . . dead."

"What o'clock vould it be?"

"I'm not sure, but somewhere about midnight, I guess."

"Found him. Dead?"

"Yes, Jasper."

Mr. Shrig's glance flashed to David's face and for a long moment they stared into each other's eyes.

"You found 'im . . . in 'is chair . . . stabbed to death—eh?"

"Yes, Jasper."

"Good!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "You don't 'ave to take your oath nor yet svear, your vord's good enough for me, pal . . ."

"Thank you!" said David, and reached out impulsively to grasp his companion's hand.

"Though, look'ee, I ain't a court o' law, pal."

"Indeed, I know how awkwardly I should be placed were this known——" began David.

"An' no error!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "Vich I therefore ax you, vot brought you there last night?"

"The hope that I might be in time to save Sir Nevil's life."

"So you knowed 'e was in danger, pal — in near and deadly danger, did ye?"

"Yes, Jasper."

"Who from?"

"This I cannot tell you."

"Meaning as you know but von't tell?"

"Precisely!"

"Pal, you don't 'ave to — I found the party's 'at, or, as you might say, cady — vich is an 'at as I think I've seen afore, an 'at belonging to . . . let's say, a nameless wagrant. Lord love me!" he went on dolefully, "Lord love my eyes and limbs, but life's outrageous 'ard for one o' my perfession. 'Ere's Sir Nevil Loring, Baronet, thanks to the perwerseness o' Fate, been an' got 'isself murdered and give me the slip only just in the werry nick o' time . . . 'e ought to ha' died — different, pal! . . . You understand me, I think?"

David bowed his head.

"Con-seqvently 'ere's me diddled by Fate most crool — and vith another case on my 'ands, a mystery, pal David, as is like to cost a deal o' time an' trouble."

"Are clues so scarce, then, Jasper?"

"Con-trairiwise, pal, they're a-layin' around so thick I'm a-running foul o' them — constant! Possible murderers is a-popping up on every 'and, con-tinual, and motives is everywhere."

"O!" exclaimed David, nearly upsetting his ale again, "do . . . do you mean you suspect — someone?"

"Suspect?" quoth Mr. Shrig wearily, "Lord love ye, pal, sit nearer and I'll read over the list of 'em." So saying, he drew from his pocket a small yet bulky volume and thumbing over to a certain page, read as follows in voice scarce above a whisper:

"'Parties suspected in murder of Sir N., vith reason for said suspicion: Number Vun, Mrs. Belindy, suspected as residing on place of crime . . . Possible! Number Two, Miss Anti-clea, suspected ditto and also as being of hot, passionate temper and oncommon strong as females go . . . Werry probable! N.B. To be took partic'lar notice of——'"

"Ridiculous!" exclaimed David. "Why should you write her down in your damned book——"

"'As bein' 'ot-tempered and oncommon strong as females go——'"

"That does not make her a murderess——"

"But Natur' and Circumstances might, pal. . . . And I've only wrote her down 'werry probable'. . . . 'Number Three, Mr. Maulyverey ditto and being in love vith Number Two, Miss A. aforesaid——'"

"How do you know he's in love with her?"

"By obserwation, pal! . . . Lemme go on: 'love wi' Number Two and likewise being a quiet, desp'ret cove and dangerous . . . Werry probable indeed. N.B. Also to be vatched. Number Four, Benjamin Bowker, a' ex-convict——'"

"How did you learn of him?" questioned David.

"Obserwation, pal! . . . 'Ex-convict, lately returned, an' suspected o' windictive designs agin' deceased. Also 'is 'at found on scene o' crime. A' extry-special 'opeful subject. Number Five, Thomas Yaxley, 'ead gamekeeper to deceased an' suspected of other fax, also known to have threatened deceased vith gun and now disappeared——'"

"Ha!" exclaimed David. "Has he so, indeed?"

"Ah, wanished 'ide and 'air, pal! . . . 'Another extry-special 'opeful an' promisin' subject. N.B. Has werry large, strong, strangler's 'ands. To be adwertised for. Number Six, Sir David Loring, Baronet, as 'aving 'ad vords wi' deceased; werry lately, and threatened same vith a pistol——'"

"So you know of this also, do you!" said David grimly.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig placidly. "So here y'are, sir, all dooly wrote down by me as in dooty bound! But lemme go on. . . . 'vith a pistol, an' 'aving took himself off to parts unknown——'"

"And pray how do you describe me?"

"V'y, pal, I've got you wrote down 'Doubtful'!"

"Thank you for that at least!" said David, smiling.

"And that's the lot—at present!" sighed Mr. Shrig, putting away his pocket-book, "an' enough too, by Goles!"

"It seems a fairly large and varied selection!" said David.

"So it is, sir. But it'll narrer down, bit by bit. But until I proves 'em innocent I regards 'em all as the guilty party."

"Even me, Jasper?"

"Dooty," sighed Mr. Shrig, shaking his head, "is dooty, pal. And this nat'rally brings us to the body o' the deceased. . . . It's a werry speakin' corpse, though to be sure the vepping's gone, the knife, dagger or stilletter as vas the instrument o' the fact, and ain't been found yet. Still, this here body tells a lot—as you may ha' noticed when you found it. How did you find it pal—how?"

In answer to this expected question David briefly recounted his horrible experience, careful, of course, to omit all reference to Anticlea or the dagger, and in consequence uncomfortably conscious of his hearer's fixed scrutiny.

"So that vas the way of it—eh, pal?"

"Yes, Jasper . . . it was most horrible!" said David, shivering.

Mr. Shrig gazed up at the evening sky, his lips pursed in their soundless whistle, while David watched him uneasily.

"Then you didn't take occasion to inspect the cadaver close or careful, pal?"

"No, indeed! I . . . I hurried away as quickly as possible. Have you any theory of how . . . how it happened, Jasper?"

"Ay, David. 'T is my belief he was stabbed from behind afore 'e could rise, stabbed werry suddenly as he threw back his 'ead to laugh, and vas dead immediate by a downward, slant-vise blow above the collar-bone——"

"Such a blow as only a man's hand could strike!" David suggested.

"Werry true, pal—or a desp'rit 'ooman! Now, seeing as you 'urried away, you didn't 'appen to notice anything . . . queerish about the corp'?"

"Queerish?" repeated David.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, "for, although deceased's clothes vas novise disordered, his right shoe vas missing! . . . Vich is strange-like!"

"Missing?" repeated David, chilled with an unaccountable horror.

"Least-vays it was n't on 'is foot."

"You mean it had been taken away?"

"'Ardly that, pal, but I found it a-top of a werry tall press, t'other side the room."

"Strange!" muttered David. "Strange . . . and surely rather terrible."

"This is a strange case, pal David. But as to terrible, I've knowed terribler! . . . And then there's his right 'and . . . the thumb and first fingers o' same smeared vith ink as if—'im in the act o' writing—somebody 'ad snatched the pen. Likevise I found a pen laying close agin the vinder . . . the quill all twisted and broke and the feather tore! Then, again, in a recess close to the body is a writing-table littered wi' papers, pens and ink . . . as you may ha' noticed."

"No, I saw nothing of it."

"Howsomever, there it is, pal, and vot's more, the silver inkpot had been knocked over so that the ink had made a puddle on the floor. . . . And, pal — somebody 'ad trod into that theer puddle! An' David . . . I knows who!"

Here David moved so violently that his tankard fell, spilling its contents on the grass; observing which catastrophe Mr. Shrig hastened to gulp his own ale into safety.

"You . . . you know who it was?" stammered David.

"Pal," answered Mr. Shrig, wiping his mouth on an end of his neckerchief, "I do!"

"Well?" enquired David breathlessly, "Well?"

"Well, this mornin', while I vas axing questions o' the family and servants, a' agent o' mine vas a-seekin' above stairs, an' in a certain chamber, pal, hid in a dark cupboard 'e found a pair o' shoes and the sole o' vun o' them stained vith ink werry plain an' beautiful for to see! Vich shoes I 'old at this moment as ewidence in the case."

"A . . . a man's shoes, of course!" said David, stooping to grope for his fallen tankard.

"Pre-cisely, pal! They belongs to Mr. Maulyvery."

David stared awhile at the tankard in his hand, wholly unaware of the eyes that watched him so keenly.

"Can you arrest him on such evidence?"

"I might, pal, only for just vun thing — an' a werry small thing, too!"

"What, Jasper?"

"A thing as I found on the corp' itself, a thing vich, seein' you are you, I 'll give ye a peep at if ye say the vord."

"Thanks, Jasper, if you will."

Diving into one of his voluminous pockets, Mr. Shrig at length extricated a bulging wallet amongst whose contents he quested with a blunt finger while

David stared blindly at the empty tankard in his fist, and waited, cold with apprehension and vague foreboding.

"Here ve are!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig at last. "Sit closer, pal David, nearer . . . nearer still — so!" From the wallet he drew a screw of paper which he undid with the utmost care, "Look'ee here, pal — look!"

Glancing up obediently, David saw between Mr. Shrig's coarse thumb and finger a something long and silky that stirred to the air, glistening where the light caught it . . . a long, curling hair of red-gold.

"I found it," said Mr. Shrig, in placid satisfaction, "I found it, pal, tangled about the three silver buttons of Sir Nevil's right sleeve! . . . A voman's 'air, pal, and of a colour not to be mistook — eh? And . . . caught in the buttons of Sir Nevil's sleeve . . . !"

"If ever," said David suddenly, in a strange, hushed tone, "if ever a man deserved death . . . he did . . ."

"True enough, pal, and mighty fort'nate to be so took off. But then 'e died by murder, d'ye see, and, dooty being dooty, I mean to run down the party or parties as done the deed, for them as murders 'angs — be they 'igh or low degree, man or ——"

David's hand flashed out suddenly and the glowing tendril was gone from Mr. Shrig's fingers, to be borne away upon the fragrant evening air . . . and in that same moment David was upon his feet.

"Damn you!" he cried. "Damn you for the cold-blooded, soulless animal you are!"

"Strike me perishing blind an' dumb!" ejaculated Mr. Shrig, and made to rise also, but, meeting David's look, sank back again: "Lord!" said he in hoarse, whispering tones, "so you . . . love 'er, do ye, pal? Yes, by Goles, ye do! . . . Then the Lord help ye, David . . . the Lord and all the angels ——"

But staying for no more, David turned on his heel and entered the inn.

CHAPTER XXVIII

In Which Her Grace Makes a Discovery

The inn, usually so quiet, seemed all astir, for scarcely had David crossed the threshold than his ears were assailed by a medley of sounds from the tap-room — the shuffling of hobnailed boots, the clink of glass and pewter, with a rumble and buzz of excited conversation; wherefore, yearning for the peaceful seclusion of his own small chamber, David turned away and was in the act of mounting the stair when he paused, suddenly arrested by a voice throatily deep and loudly authoritative:

"Ye may suspicion 'ere an' ye may suspicion theer, friends, ye may say wot ye will an' talk 'ow ye may, but I thinks wot I thinks!"

The tap-room door stood ajar, and by leaning over the banisters David could see the speaker for a large, plethoric man, sleek and round as to paunch and jowl, pompous as to bearing, who sat a little aloof from the company with a quart pot in his plump hand.

"I knaws," he repeated, with solemn wag of big head, "wot I thinks, am thinkin' an' shall think, now and 'ereafter, amen!"

"Then let's 'ear!" said a small man, sharp of nose and voice. "Us do all know as you've a marvellous 'ead, so wot are ye a-thinkin' of, Mr. Sprowls? Summat about this 'ere 'orrible murder — eh?"

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Sprowls, "though I should call it a ass-ah-sination, myself!"

"It's the same thing, sir, only spoke different!" said the Sharp-nosed Man.

"Very likely," admitted Mr. Sprowls, "but, y'see, I generally-always speaks different, such bein' my natur' . . ."

"And generally-always nobody never nowise understands ye, nohow!" retorted the Sharp-nosed Man.

"Very likely!" repeated Mr. Sprowls. "Because eddication is a hart as languishes woeful 'ereabouts!"

"But wot might you be a-thinkin' along o' this 'ere crime, Mr. Sprowls, sir?" questioned a beefy, smocked-frocked, youngish man with fiery whiskers.

"Why, I thinks," said Mr. Sprowls, and paused to sip his beer and glance round portentously upon his eager audience; "I thinks, 'aving meditated the matter considerable, as the 'and wot basely ass-ah-sinated Squire Loring so brutalious, were the 'and of — no man!"

"But that ain't sense nor yet reason," cried the Sharp-nosed Man, "because us do arl know as Squire Loring is quite murdered — ah, murdered dead, sure an' sound, 'e be!"

"The 'and," continued Mr. Sprowls, with a slow and stately flourish of the quart pot, "the 'and as done the sanguinarious deed, accordin' to my thinkin', was the 'and of a . . . fee-male!"

Here rose a chorus of amazed ejaculations and eager questioning: whereupon, after a meditative sip at his beer, Mr. Sprowls made answer:

"I thinks and likewise o-pines as the 'and wot committed this 'ere barbarious hact is the i-dentical 'and wot committed a 'ssault and likewise battery on my own person with a w'ip——"

"Lord, Mr. Sprowls!" gasped the Sharp-nosed Man. "Lord love us arl . . . ye never mean — Miss 'Clea?"

"Miss 'Clea!" snorted Mr. Sprowls, "Miss 'Clea indeed! An' wot if I do? Miss 'Clea . . . bah! 't ain't as if she was one o' the Quality! She nat'rally ain't no

better than none o' we — not so good! A beggar's brat . . . a pauper took off of the parish! There ain't nothing o' the Quality about her — no!"

"But . . . Lorramity, Mr. Sprowls, d'ye mean as Miss 'Clea . . . done the deed?"

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Sprowls, and in that moment the door swung violently open and in strode David.

"Damned liar!" said he; and, being by nature instant of action as of word, snatched up the first missile that offered, which chanced to be an ancient beaver hat, and dashed it into the face of the astonished Mr. Sprowls, who promptly emptied his quart pot over himself in sheer amazement.

"Scoundrel!" said David. "Stand up and show us what a liar looks like!"

Mr. Sprowls, whose reverence for the Quality was profound, cringed at this well-bred, imperious voice and made to rise: but then the Quality, according to his conception, went always in broadcloth and fine linen; thus, noting David's shabby exterior, Mr. Sprowls sat back defiantly in his chair and scowled:

"My beer!" quoth he. "A quart o' good beer . . . all wasted! I be fair wet through . . . drenched I be! An' wi' my own beer! An' arl along of a young rapscallious, trampin' roofin o' the roads! O shameful! Willi-am . . . throw 'im out — immediate——"

At this summons up rose the beefy, smock-frocked, youngish man, whose rubicund visage glowed belligerently between fiery whiskers, a purposeful young man who clenched red fists and advanced upon David with a joyous alacrity while the company hummed in happy expectation.

"Hay, my chap," quoth the beefy young man, "you 'eered wot Mr. Sprowls said, Oi rackon? Well, out ye go, or——"

Here the beefy young man raised a fist and thrust out head and jaw aggressively, in which instant David

sprang with fist that shot, smacking true, to its mark, whereupon red face and fiery whiskers vanished, in whose stead appeared a momentary vision of hobnailed boots and stout, gaitered legs.

"Lie still!" said David, frowning down at the prostrate William. "Lie still or I'll do it again!"

"Sir," answered the beefy young man, tenderly cherishing his left whisker, "Oi ain't a-goin' to move, not for nobody nor nothin'—no'ow!"

"As for the rest of you," continued David, glaring round upon the silent company, "let me hear you repeat or so much as whisper the lie uttered by yonder fat fool and I'll be the death o' you!"

"Admirable, sir! Very happily expressed! Exceedingly right and proper!" said a voice.

Glancing hastily about, David espied a bonnet protruding through the open lattice, a bonnet whose size, like the voice, seemed familiar and from whose depths gleamed a pair of bright, strangely youthful eyes. Meeting David's wondering glance, these eyes opened very wide and two very small mittened hands clasped each other:

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "Either I dream or you are a ghost, young man. But ghosts don't usually knock people down . . . and yet I am very wide-awake! . . . the same height . . . the same line of nose and chin . . . the same turn o' the head. . . . Amazing! Sir, I must talk with you. Also, I am thirsty. . . . Pray send away these curious, staring wretches—no, I will!" The bonnet vanished from the window to reappear at the door, crowning an extremely small yet determined-looking lady so elegantly bedight, from nodding feather to tiny sandalled foot, that Mr. Sprowls, immediately recognising "The Quality", was upon his feet, bowing servile back, hat in hand, all in a moment.

"You are the beadle, I think?" she demanded.

"Yes, your ladyship's grace, mam, I am. Very 'umbly at your Grace's service."

"Then you may go. And pray take your companions with you."

"Himmediate, your Grace!"

And Mr. Sprowls, his pomposity no whit abashed, having flourished forth the mute company, bowed his moist person out after them forthwith.

"And now, sir," said the lady, seating herself upon the big settle and removing her bonnet, "now, sir, you may talk to me."

An ancient, autocratic lady this, very small and very upright, with cheeks suspiciously pink and curls suspiciously dark and luxuriant, but her eyes were wonderfully young and handsome.

"Lady," said David, somewhat taken aback and with his Southern drawl consequently a little more pronounced than usual, "you honour me!"

"Sir," she answered, "you interest me!"

"You are infinite kind, mam!" said David, bowing.

"No indeed, sir. I am merely an inquisitive old woman. But I was young once, years and years ago, and you remind me strangely of those halcyon days. Pray what is your name?"

"David, mam."

"And your surname?" Something in her tense attitude, the keenness of her glance, rendered him vaguely uneasy. Hesitating for an answer, he turned to look out of the window and found there inspiration:

"Hedges, lady."

"So I see!" she nodded. "I asked for your surname."

"Hedges, lady."

"Indeed?" said she, looking at him.

"Indeed, mam!" he answered, looking at her. "Pray what did you mean by your talk of a ghost?"

"I meant, sir, the ghost of vanished days, long-

forgotten dreams, the ghost of the—'might have been' . . . and I find that it answers to the name of 'Hedges'!"

"I fear you are beyond my comprehension, mam!"

"Quite!" she nodded, "But O, David Hedges," sighed she, a little wistfully, "when I look at you I might be ringletted seventeen instead of bewigged seventy. You remind me of . . . heigho! To be sure, upon closer inspection, you are not handsome enough! But all the same I will drink with you . . . your eyes, your nose and chin . . . yes, you may order me some ale."

"Ale, madam?" gasped David.

"In a tankard, sir!" she nodded. "And pray, Mr. Hedges, don't gape!"

Obediently he summoned Tom, the flustered landlord, who, overawed by the rank of his unexpected customer, bobbed his bullet head, knuckled his eyebrow, and presently setting before them two foaming tankards, bobbed himself out again as fast as possible.

"You are not English, I think, Mr. Hedges?"

"Indeed yes, mam."

"But your speech?"

"I was bred in Virginia, lady."

"To be sure you look like an Englishman, and box like one."

"My father preferred fists to pistols, mam."

"Wise man! Is he alive?"

"No, lady."

"Your mother?"

"No, lady."

"Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"No, lady."

"And what brings you to England?"

"To . . . better myself."

"Have you succeeded?"

"No indeed, mam!"

"And have you resided long — here in the village?"

"No, lady."

"And yet you know Anticlea, of course?"

"I have spoken with her . . . three or four times, madam."

"Mm!" said the Duchess, viewing him with her quick, bright glance, "This may mean anything! You are not in love with her, I trust?"

"Most certainly not, madam!" answered David, flushing.

"Ha! Very emphatic! Or she with you, sir?"

"Heaven forbid, mam."

"Amen!" quoth the Duchess. "And yet you knock a man down in her cause? Very right! Extremely gallant and proper! Mr. Hedges, your health!" And lifting the heavy tankard in both small, mittened hands, she pledged him; whereupon up rose David to bow his acknowledgments.

"Pray what were you in Virginia, sir? Your trade — profession?"

"A . . . a farmer, mam."

"Mm!" said the Duchess musingly. "There is a joy in asking awkward questions, and you are a very indifferent liar, sir."

Here David had recourse to his ale, but seeing her about to question him further, spoke in self-defence:

"I think it but right, madam, to inform you that yesterday afternoon, quite inadvertently, I overheard your conversation with Captain . . . Chumley is his name, I think?"

"Then I trust you were sufficiently edified."

David bowed.

"And pray why confess your eavesdropping?"

"Because honour compels, mam."

"And your name is Hedges!"

"At your service, lady!" he answered, with another bow.

"Did you learn your courtly manners behind your plough, sir?"

"Indeed, mam, since you ask, I was not always ploughing."

"O — drink your beer!" quoth the Duchess, "and then be good enough to explain how you contrived — inadvertently — to overhear a private conversation?"

"I was on the rick, lady."

"What in the world for?"

"To . . . to rest, mam."

"Ha!" quoth the Duchess, and lifting tankard to lip, stared at him over the rim with one very bright eye and thus caught him watching her, whereupon down went tankard on table with a bang:

"Are you staring at my wig, sir?" she demanded.

"No — no, indeed —" stammered David in shocked accents, "indeed, mam, I never supposed you wore . . . that is . . . you misjudge me . . . pray believe, indeed ——" David floundered to flushed, distressful silence.

"To be sure I wear a wig, sir — generally askew ——"

"O, madam, pray . . . lady, I beg ——" he faltered.

"Fiddlesticks, sir! Why should an old woman's wig distress you? Certainly I wear a wig and raddle my cheeks, as everyone knows, of course! But my teeth are as natural as my eyes — and both are sharp! And now," said she, putting on her bonnet, "if you have quite finished your beer, I will beg your arm along the road."

Side by side they stepped out into a fragrant evening, and with her hand hooked within David's arm the small but indomitable Duchess pursued her enquiries, thus:

Duchess: Talking of Virginia, sir, I had friends living there, very old and dear friends. Humphrey

Loring and his wife Angela. . . . You may have heard of them?

David: Why, to speak truth, mam ——

Duchess: Is sometimes difficult, I know, sir. But do your best!

David: Virginia is a large State, mam, and I was generally at home ——

Duchess: Ploughing, of course. Heigho! (She yawns obtrusively.) What a charming rural scene: those thatched cottages bowered in roses, this winding road and such trim hedges, Mr. Hedges.

David: Yes, mam.

Duchess: Have you ever visited Loring Chase?

David: Twice, lady.

Duchess: Indeed? Then you must know — have known Sir Nevil?

David: We were acquainted, mam ——

Duchess: An unfortunate, tragic family for generations these Lorings, as perhaps you have heard, sir.

David: No, lady. . .

Duchess: There was Sir David, Humphrey and Nevil's father . . . he was of my day . . . they called him "the Wild Loring" . . . who killed his best friend in a duel, lost the woman he loved, married one he did n't and got himself killed before his boys were born —— And all — all through a foolish mistake! Surely he was the saddest, most tragic figure of them all! O, young sir, beware of judging hastily or by appearances alone! . . . Poor David! Poor mistaken David. . . . And but a few short weeks ago his grandson, another David, was murdered, it is said, and to-day . . . Nevil ——

David: An unfortunate, tragic house indeed! And, Sir David . . . was he . . . dear to you, lady?

Duchess: He was, sir . . . in those halcyon days . . . so full of happy dreams, the days of seventeen. To-day I am seventy and wide-awake, alas ——

DAVID: And wonderfully, marvellously young.

DUCHESS: With rouged cheeks and a wig.

DAVID: I should never have guessed, mam.

DUCHESS: Amiable young man! Sometimes you lie quite pleasingly . . . tell me more of yourself. What do you here so far from Virginia?

DAVID: Seek work, lady.

DUCHESS: And without success, I think?

DAVID: At present, mam.

DUCHESS: Are you staying in the village?

DAVID: No, lady, at "The Rearing Horse" tavern where I had the honour to meet you.

DUCHESS: Remain there for the next few days. I have some small interest and may hear of something to your benefit.

DAVID: Lady, you are very kind——

DUCHESS: And we part here, sir—for the present.

They had reached a pair of tall wrought-iron gates that opened upon a noble avenue beyond which, mounted upon its wide terrace, rose the house of Loring.

"A great, gloomy place!" said the Duchess, shaking her head at it. "And yet 't was very different once upon a time, years and years ago. . . . There is a picture hangs in the Long Gallery, I will show it you one day, perhaps. Good night, Mr. Hedges, and next time you have occasion to use your fists may I be there to see."

CHAPTER XXIX

In Which Ben Bowker Describes the Murder

Evening changed to a night warm and very still, a night of all-pervading quietude lit by a radiant moon; and lured by the calm serenity, awed by the universal hush, David walked on, he cared not whither.

Often he stayed to look round about upon the country-side, this unfamiliar England so vastly different from that grander, wilder country beyond seas. Here, instead of lofty mountains, illimitable plains and mighty rivers, were gentle hills, smiling meadows and murmurous streams winding sleepily between reed and rush or bending willows; and his heart swelled because here was the home of his ancestors, his dead father's England. He called to mind how often that lonely father, in voice a-thrill with yearning, had described to his childish fancy this very stretch of country:

"Where the land sweeps up to Firle, Davy, meadow and stream and copse, to Firle and the purple Downs beyond . . . O, the Down-country, Davy lad, the good, kind Down-country! 'T is back there we 'll go together some day, God willing."

Reaching a gate, David leaned there and, soothed by brooding peace and restfulness about him, let his thoughts go back to his dead father, that solitary exile who had taught him to love and revere the mother who had died so long ago and the England he had never seen.

It was hereabouts his father had played as a child,

perhaps within the very wood that loomed before him now, so very sombre and mysterious——

David started, then stood very still and tense, for out from this wood had crept a shape which, slowly approaching, resolved itself into the figure of a man who limped wearily, aiding himself with a staff; suddenly the man, espying David, halted to peer, and, with a leap of the heart, David recognised Ben Bowker, the ex-convict.

In a moment David was over the gate, but Bowker never stirred.

"Wot . . . is it you, chum!" he exclaimed softly as David drew near. "Lord love me, I thought as they'd got me at last!"

"Who?" questioned David. "Who should get you, and for what?"

"Them Bow Street coves . . . for a job as I never done."

"You mean . . . the murder?"

"Ay! Nigh 'ad me once, they did. Ye see I'm sick, chum, sick . . . Tom Yaxley (curse 'im!) give me pretty well as much as I give 'im t'other night, and now them Bow Street Runners is arter me for a thing as I never done."

"Meaning the murder?"

"Ay. I'm innocent as a babby in arms, chum."

"You left your hat there."

"Ay, I knows I did, bad luck to it! But so would you . . . so would any man as 'eard wot I 'eard!"

"Tell me."

"Why, so I will, chum, only let's sit down, my leg's easier sitting."

"Now tell me," said David in the same level tones; "tell me everything you know of Sir Nevil Loring's death."

"'E deserved all 'e got!" said Bowker fiercely. "And I meant to do it . . . went there to do it, I

did, but I never got a chance . . . somebody was just afore me, chum."

"Tell me!"

"Well, it would be along o' twelve o'clock, I rackon, afore I reached the 'ouse. . . ."

"Twelve o'clock? You are sure?"

"Ay, ye see, Tom Yaxley 'ad 'urt me more than I thought and I was forced to rest every now and then . . . but 'urt or no I meant to finish an' be done wi' Sir Nevil for good an' all. So on I limped, though it took me a goodish time, through the wood an' over the wall and come to the 'ouse at last to find it all dark except one winder on the terrace; the curtains was n't quite drawed and peeping between 'em I see . . . 'im!"

"Alive?"

"Ay, that 'e was, and smiling with his white teeth showing . . . the old smile as used to raise the devil in me years ago. Well, I crep' away, chum ——"

"Did you see . . . anyone with him?"

"Not me, I did n't wait, chum. I crep' away round to a winder I remembered . . . I knows the place inside and out . . . and 't was n't long afore I 'ad that winder open. So in I went, and took out the knife I 'd brought for 'im."

"What sort of knife?"

"This 'ere, chum," and Bowker showed a short, strong, broad-bladed knife such as butchers might use.

"You did n't chance to find a knife . . . in the wood, then?"

"Not me, chum! Wot like o' knife?"

"No matter! Go on!"

"Well, there was me creepin' across the room quite cool an' steady. I 'd took off my 'at to stifle 'im with if he 'd happened to scream . . . and I 'd just stepped into the passage when I 'eard 'im begin to laugh . . . ah, and well I knowed it, chum, soft-like and mockin'

it was, and I gripped my knife tighter. But . . . O, chum . . . all at once this laugh ended . . . sudden-like . . . ended in a wet, chokin' cough . . . a sound as I never want to 'ear again, a sound as turned me cold . . . me, chum — me as 'ad come to end 'im! There I stood ice-cold and tremblin' like a scared child, for I knowed wot that 'ere sound meant!"

"Yes! . . . And then?"

"I dropped my 'at, chum!"

"Did you hear . . . anything . . . more?"

"Ay, I did. I 'eerd the creak of a stair and a rustle like a woman's gown might make agin the panelling——"

"Or a man's coat!"

"Why, it might, chum, ay — it might, though it seemed more like a woman's gownd to me."

"And was this . . . all?"

"No. Arter a bit, all bein' quiet, I crep' to the room; the door was open and I see——"

"Were the candles alight, then?"

"Ay, chum, they was . . . and there 'e sat, chum . . . dead an' bloody . . . and squintin' up at the ceiling — laughing still! I knowed 'e were stone dead, but I 'ad to go a bit nearer . . . and then I 'eerd a step comin' down the stair — soft-like——"

"A man's step?"

"Yes, a man's step, chum. So I turned tail . . . out through the winder and away, clean forgettin' my 'at, curse it! And that's the gospel truth of it, chum!"

For a while David sat staring down at his right hand, which was opening and closing spasmodically, until at last Bowker ventured to touch him:

"You believe me, chum, don't ye?" he questioned wistfully. "You believe as I've told you everything gospel true?"

Then looking into the speaker's haggard face, David

bowed his head and spoke in a voice that was like a groan:

"O God help me . . . yes!"

"Ain't sick, are ye, chum?"

"No!"

"Well, I am — leastways my leg is. And 'ere 's me 'unted like a wild beast, all along o' my 'at, for a job as I never done, which is crool 'ard luck. . . . I s'pose you ain't got anything eatable about ye, chum? I've been laying low in the woods all day, and a man must eat. You ain't got such a thing as a crust, chum?"

"I can bring you food," said David, "and will do so gladly if you will wait ——"

"No, no, chum, thankin' you kindly, the risk 's too great, you might be seen an' follered . . . that theer Bow Street cove is a sharp 'un as traps go, but 'e 'll be sharper yet to ketch me. I knows the country 'ereabouts like my 'and — ah, better!"

"And how about money? Here are thirty-odd shillings left of the two guineas you lent me ——"

"Keep 'em, chum, keep 'em. I got plenty, though I'd give it all for a mug of ale an' a square meal."

"Is there nothing I can do for you, Ben Bowker?"

"Why — yes," answered the ex-convict, a little wistfully, "you might wish me luck, chum . . . I ain't 'ad much, so fur! . . . And likewise . . . your 'and . . . friendship-like . . . and to show as you believe as I've spoke ye gospel true."

So David grasped Ben Bowker's hand and shook it heartily:

"Good luck to you, Ben!" said he. "A merciful Providence has kept you from crime to some good purpose. So here 's wishing you joy of it, Ben, with all good luck and happiness at last. . . . And if ever you should find your Nancy, you go to her innocent of your enemy's blood, with clean hands ——"

Ben Bowker sighed hopelessly and shook his head:

"My little Nan! Poor, lost creetur! Things might ha' gone kinder wi' me if she 'ad lived. . . . But she's dead, chum, or she'd ha' come back 'ome afore this, back to 'er old mother as is a-waiting for 'er all day an' every day and prayin' for 'er every night over yonder in Lewes."

"In Lewes?" repeated David. "Does her mother live in Lewes?"

"Ay, keeps a little shop she do, in the High Street just over the——"

"Yes," said David, "a little huckster's shop . . . just over the bridge . . . name of Martin——"

"True enough, chum, but 'ow should you know the name was——?"

"It was told me on London Bridge scarce two months ago, by a solitary woman whose face bore marks of sorrow but nothing evil——"

Rising upon his knees, Bowker reached out and caught David by the arms.

"Chum," said he, hoarsely. "God love ye, chum . . . d'ye mean my little Nan . . . my Nancy . . . alive? O chum, be this true?"

"As true as God, Ben!"

Now at this, being yet upon his knees, the ex-convict bowed his head as one in prayer:

"Then I believe," said he, "I do believe there is a God, arter all! . . . So, God bless ye, chum! I'm away for London this very night to find my little Nan because my 'ands are clean, chum! Ay, and find 'er I will if it takes me all my days!"

Rising painfully, Ben Bowker stood a moment, his haggard face uplifted to the radiant night sky; then grasping David's hand suddenly he wrung it hard and, without another word, turned and limped upon his way.

CHAPTER XXX

Mr. Shrig Demonstrates the Element of Surprise

Long after the ex-convict had hobbled out of sight, David stood staring yet upon the empty air, a man dismayed, tortured by Doubt grown stronger, more insistent, and harassed by an ever-growing fear, "— a rustle like a woman's gown might make against the panelling."

After some while he went on again, but walking mechanically now, heeding no more the peaceful scene around him, his mind obsessed by dark and brooding thought.

Careless alike of direction or fatigue, he wandered on until at last he found himself on the outskirts of Loring village, its clustered cottages dark and silent, its rustic folk asleep hours ago.

"Was she asleep?" he wondered. . . . And surely sleep was a thrice-blessed thing, a gentle anodyne for troubled souls, a blissful surcease from pain of mind and body. . . . Well, he also would seek this kindly solace, he himself who needed it so bitterly. . . .

Before him, sharply defined against the moon, rose the age-worn tower of Loring Church in the shadow of whose hoary walls lay so many Lorings: Nevils and Humphreys and Davids, back and back to that mail-clad Sir David who, limping home from King Richard's Crusade, built the church as a thank-offering; a large and diverse company to whose numbers another Nevil would so soon be added:

Sacred to the Memory
of
Sir Nevil Loring
Thirteenth Baronet

Where now was the unlovely soul of him, plunged with such sudden violence into that dark unknown whence there was no returning?

Moved by sudden impulse, David crossed the wide road and entering the churchyard paced slowly between grassy mounds and crumbling tombstones, pausing ever and anon to read a name and speculate upon such as slept below, once so full of life, and now . . .

A wheezing cough at no great distance cut these reflections short and, glancing about, David was amazed and somewhat startled to espy a smock-frocked old man, perched upon a flat tombstone, beckoning with bony finger.

"Come 'ere, sir — come 'ere!" croaked this apparition. "If ye bain't afeart o' the ghostesses, come 'ere an' I'll tell'ee summat."

Wondering, David approached and saw this for a very ancient man whose face, prodigiously wrinkled, pendulous of nose and wide of mouth, leered up at him through a bush of white hair and whisker.

"And pray," enquired David in his friendly manner, "what might you be doing here at such a time o' night?"

"I've 'ad a quar'l wi' me darter," answered Patriarch, "an' when sich be so Oi generally-arlways comes out 'ere an' sets among these 'ere tombses for to plague 'er . . . she dassent come arter me 'ere of a night 'count o' the ghostesses."

"But is n't it rather cold for you?"

"Why, ye see, Oi only plagues 'er this way o' foine noights. If it du rain Oi goes into the pig-sty . . . an' when it be cold Oi gets into the 'ay-loft — wi' a

pitch-fork! . . . But Oi loikes a grave-yard best — graves is in my blood, and comes nat'ral to me."

"You don't fear ghosts, then?"

"Bless 'ee, no sir! Ghostes, graves an' dead-men's bones is meat an' drink to Oi, as ye might say, me 'aving been brought up wi' 'em from me cradle. . . . Ye see, my feyther were a sextant."

"Indeed?"

"Ah! Smelt o' graves 'e did — 'specially in the wet weather. . . . Made me a doll outen a thigh-bone 'e did, an' Oi useter call it 'Bossy' arter parson's dun cow . . . never would go to bed without it, not Oi. You'm a stranger, eh, young man?"

"Yes. Though we have met once before, I think," David replied.

"Why, then, 'ave ye 'eered of our murder? Us doan't get murders in these parts so frequent as Lewes nor yet Lon'on, but when us do . . . Lewes an' Lon'on's nowheres! An' now we got a wonnerful murder . . . O wonnerful!" Here the hoary one rocked himself back and forth upon the tombstone wheezing rapturously. "Somebody's been an' took an' murdered our Squire . . . 'es they 'ave, murdered Squire Loring as arl the world was afeard of, 'specially poor folk . . . dead 'e be! My son Jole be 'elpin' to mak' 'is tomb arl ready for 'e. They be a-goin' to bury Squire so soon as the Crowner's 'quested an' set on 'im . . . 'im 'aving been murdered to death. An' Oi bean't nowise a-breekin' my old 'eart over 'im neether, no — glad Oi be!"

"Why?"

"Becos' Squire be better dead . . . why, 'e 'ad me put in the stocks once, 'e did, an' me arl a-quake wi' the axey. But now 'e 's gone — dead 'e be, an' nobody doan't know 'oo done it. . . . A mistree — hey, young maaster?"

"Yes, a mystery!" sighed David.

Here the old man rocked and wheezed and chuckled more ghoulishly than ever.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Becos' . . . O Lord!" chuckled the Patriarch, embracing himself ecstatically. "Stoop down an' I'll whisper . . . Oi knows 'oo done it, Oi do!"

"Indeed!"

"Ah! An' . . . wot's more, Oi seen . . . the knife!"

David leant nearer:

"What sort of knife?" he questioned sharply.

"A mighty sharp 'un! Ah . . . sharp as a needle! And wi' a silver 'andle on to it . . ."

"Silver?" exclaimed David, starting. "A silver handle?"

"Ah!" nodded the old man, "Silver!"

"How . . . where did you see it? Who showed it to you?"

"Why, she did!"

"She? . . . A woman?"

"Ah! Miss 'Clea!"

David sank down on the tomb beside the old man and, removing his hat, closed his eyes like one suddenly faint.

"Miss 'Clea be a gurt friend o' mine."

"When did she . . . show it you, and . . . where?"

"I seen 'er buy it offen a gipsy-body . . . give a golden guinea for it, she did! That were the first time Oi seen it."

"And when was the second?"

"The day afore the murder."

"Where?"

"Well, young sir, me not being afeart o' ghostesses, Oi 'appened to go over to the 'aunted mill ——"

"Where is that?"

"Why, that be th' owd Weer Mill at Loring; Oi

went theer in the evening arter a trout as Oi knowed on in the pool, when up comes Tom Yaxley——"

"Ha—Yaxley!" repeated David.

"Ah—Tom Yaxley! And in a flamin' fury an' wot 's more, 'e 'd been drinkin'! 'Look at this 'ere!' 'e says an' shows me one side of 'is face arl swole an' red. 'Wot 's done that?' says Oi. 'Squire's cane!' says he, 'But 'e won't never do it no more!' 'e says. ''E will,' says Oi, ''t is a word an' a blow wi' Squire, man or maid.' 'Well, 'e wun't strike me no more!' says Tom, fierce-like. 'Why not?' says Oi. 'Becos' 'e 'll be dead!' says Tom. 'Not 'im!' Oi says, ''is sort don't die nat'ral an' nobody dassent face Squire, more 's the pity,' Oi says. 'Well, 'e wun't live long,' says Tom, quiet-like. 'Why not?' says Oi. 'For a mighty good reason!' says Tom. 'Wot reason?' says Oi. 'This!' says Tom, snarlin' arl to oncet an' spitting mad-like, an' shows me that theer knife wi' the silver 'andle. 'Where did ye get that?' Oi says, 'That be Miss 'Clea's,' says Oi. 'So much the better!' says 'e . . . and away 'e goes."

"Yaxley!" said David, and stood upon his feet. "Have you spoken of this to anyone else?"

"Nary a soul, young maaster."

"Why not?"

"Because Oi caan't nowise never get nobody to 'ark to Oi—the gurt fules!"

"And Yaxley had the knife . . it was the same knife—you are sure?"

"Ah, sartin sure, Oi be. . . . An' now, young sir, Oi think as Oi plagued me darter about sufficient fur one night . . . 'sides, this 'ere stone begins to strike a bit chill-like, so rackon Oi 'll be gettin' 'ome to bed."

So saying, the old man arose; and side by side they left the dismal spot.

"Friend," said David, "what is your name?"

"Jole, sir, same as me son, Jole Bybrook . . . Oi

be old Jole an' me son 'e be young Jole, though 'e bean't no babby!"

"Then, friend Joel, pray take these coins as a mark of . . . of my esteem. . . . You are quite sure the knife was the same?"

"Ah, sure as sure, sir. And thank'ee kindly."

"And you have spoken of this to nobody?"

"Nary a breathin' soul . . . 'cept the straange, pleasant-spoke chap at 'The Rearing 'Orse'—'im wi' the top-boots——"

"You mean Mr. Shrig, the Bow Street Officer?"

"Ah—'im! An' Oi only told 'e 'cos 'e seemed to know arl Oi 'ad to tell 'im afore Oi told it, an' was so pleasant-spoke . . . ay, a mighty pleasant chap sure-ly! Good-night, young sir, an' thank'ee koindly arl over again!"

And homeward tottered old Joel, leaving David a prey to new agitations and perplexity . . .

So Shrig had learned of the dagger, he knew now that it had been hers! . . . That accursed dagger! But then it was hidden far beyond all possible recovery. And in this thought was comfort

The boom of the church bell chiming eleven startled him from these reflections; but ere he had left the sleeping village behind he was busily pondering the old man's story:

Could Yaxley's have been the hand, indeed? . . . The thing was impossible! He had stepped over Yaxley's unconscious body in pursuit of Bowker, who had reached Loring Chase in time to hear the crime committed. . . . And yet (if the old man's story were true) Yaxley had been possessed of the dagger upon that fatal evening . . . clearly, then, it must have passed out of his keeping. . . . But how? And to whom? David halted suddenly, smitten by a new thought. Could it be possible that, in his struggle with Yaxley, Bowker had found and possessed himself

of the dagger? Was Bowker the assassin after all . . . his story but a farrago of lies?

Involved thus in an ever-deepening perplexity, David reached the inn at last and was surprised to see Mr. Shrig seated upon one of the benches, puffing his pipe in solitary estate.

"Sir," quoth Mr. Shrig, pipe solemnly flourished in salutation, "I begs a vord."

"As many as you like," answered David.

"Then p'r'aps you'll sit down——"

"No," said David, "not until you've heard me express regret for my anger this evening. . . . I regret my words but not my act . . . and truly intended you no offence——"

"None took, pal, none took . . . though, to be sure, 'Soulless beast' vas comin' of it a bit strongish-like."

"Then pray forgive it."

"Heartily, pal . . . an' spoke like a man! . . . Though, to be sure, you did make avay wi' a piece o' ewidence, vich, as a nofficer o' the law, I'm bound to say vas a misdemeanour . . . but then, as a pal, I'm ready to admit as your love or, shall we say, passion for Miss A., Number Two, excuses much——"

"Love!" exclaimed David indignantly. "What the devil do you mean——?"

"Nat'ral affection 'twixt creeters as sexes differs, pal . . . but let that pass. As I say, being your pal, I makes allowances for your destruction of ewidence aforesaid . . . besides, I've come on other ewidence, better, ah—and surer!"

"You mean the tale old Joel told you?"

"No, pal, I means a tale as the corp' told me. Since your aforementioned d. of c., pal, I've been over body o' deceased, inch by inch, and the results, though saprising, is, on the whole, gratifying."

"You have found something . . . definite, Jasper?"

"The field is narrered, pal, the Six is now Five! Pretty soon, if the conclusions as I've drawed is correct, the Five will be Vun . . . The Vun!"

"Are you . . . sure at last, Jasper, quite . . . quite sure?"

"Pal, there's nothing sure but death! So let's leave it at that an' come to yourself. Now then: Sir David Loring you were, Sir David you are, and Sir David you will be 'enceforth in the heye o' the law if you'll say but the vord — and all along o' Jarsper!"

"Pray explain."

"Above stairs a-finishing of 'is supper, pal, is a lawyer, name o' Gillespie, a gent well-beknown to me and legal adwiser to the Loring family. Above stairs likevise is all them dockiments and papers as vas stole from you by the man who thereby saved your life beyond all doubt."

"Poor miserable fellow!"

"It only remains for you to prove your i-dentity to Mr. G.'s satisfaction and in the heye o' the law you are Sir David Loring of Loring, Barrynet and a werry rich gent into the bargain! Vot d'ye say to Jarsper now, pal?"

"Thank him for his interest, and say, no!"

"Eh — no?" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, "No, is it?"

"'No' it is, Jasper."

"Ecod!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig. "You can scrag . . . ah, an' gibbet me if I ever 'eard sich barefaced flyin' in the face o' fortun' — not to mention Prowidence! And for vhy?"

"For a very sufficient reason."

"Blow me!" gasped Mr. Shrig. "A fortun' an' a title goin' a-begging! . . . And 'oles in 'is boots! Your 'ead ain't troublin' you again, is it, pal?"

"Thank you, no, Jasper."

"Why, then, 'ave a look at this 'ere." And taking out his pocket-book, Mr. Shrig drew thence a folded

paper which he opened and held out for David's inspection. The moon was very bright, and written in large, bold characters David read this:

"Copy of Sir N.'s Will for Jasper Shrig only.

I, Nevil Loring etc., being sound in mind etc., do will and bequeath all that I die possessed of etc., to my Incorrigible Anticlea in the earnest hope and confident expectation that it may prove her ultimate damnation; provided and conditionally that she, the said Anticlea, submit herself absolutely to the guardianship of Her Grace the Duchess of Camberhurst until she, the aforesaid Anticlea, marry or attain the age of twenty-five. So may two felines flesh their claws, each upon each, to their separation or mutual extinction. It is further provided that, in the event of Her Grace of Camberhurst refusing this so arduous duty, the whole of the property I die possessed of etc., is bequeathed absolutely and unconditionally to my head game-keeper, Thomas Yaxley, that obedient scoundrel, him and his heirs for ever. And this I deliver etc."

"And there's for ye!" quoth Mr. Shrig as David refolded and gave back the document. "Vot say ye now, pal?"

"I say no, Jasper! Since I am dead and buried — dead I'll remain . . . for a time, at least."

"You mean as you refuse — still?"

"Absolutely and utterly!"

"But how are ye goin' to live, pal? Vot are ye a-goin' to do ——?"

"Just at present," answered David, rising, "I am going to bed. Good-night, Jasper, and thank you."

"Blow my dickey!" ejaculated Mr. Shrig; and rising also he followed David indoors. "Pal David," said

he, as he lighted his chamber candle, "the inqvest is to-morrow; you 'll go, I s'pose?"

"I don't know, Jasper. Shall you have much to say?"

"Not a vord, pal."

"Why so?" enquired David, staring.

"First because I 've took precious good care not to be called, and second because I don't come forrard wi' ewidence till I 'm ready wi' my proofs, dammem!"

"When will that be?"

"Pal, I 'll tell ye — it all depends!"

"On what, Jasper?"

Mr. Shrig's candle being well alight, he turned so that its radiance struck full upon David's face:

"It depends, pal, on 'ow soon you tell me vot you 've done wi' that there silver-'andled dagger!"

David fell back a step, staring in speechless consternation.

"Domino!" said Mr. Shrig, with placid, smiling nod, "Domino me, pal! This 'ere is vot you might call the element o' sap-rise. . . . Lord love ye, your phiz proves my deductions is right. . . . That there dagger, pal, as done the deed . . . The silver-'andled dagger as belongs to . . . us knows 'oo! . . . The stil-letter, pal, along vith a 'arf sheet o' paper, p'r'aps, as you found . . . us knows vere . . . and as you 've been and hid . . . vich only you knows vere! Justice demands 'em of you, your pal asks 'em of you. Think it over, pal, 'twixt now and to-morrow! Good-night, pal David, and . . . pleasant dreams."

Saying which, Mr. Shrig went upstairs to bed, whistling cheerily under his breath.

CHAPTER XXXI

In Which Mr. Maulverer Proffers Advice

In the spacious, sanded parlour of "The Loring Arms" Inn, whose warped gables and twinkling casements seemed ever in the act of bowing and winking at the timeworn church opposite, the coroner and his chosen twelve duly and solemnly sat upon the case before a packed audience; amongst them, seated unobtrusively in a remote corner, a more or less interested spectator, David espied Mr. Shrig.

Coroner and jury having gravely listened to Mrs. Belinda's unhesitating, soft-spoken testimony, to Anticlea's sullen answers, to Mr. Maulverer's calm and lucid statement, and to the more or less incoherent evidence of the servants; having questioned, cross-questioned and studied the weatherbeaten hat found on the scene of the crime; having pondered and deliberated, the following conclusions were finally arrived at, namely:

"That Sir Nevil Loring, of Loring Chase in the County of Sussex, Baronet, upon the night of the third instant at the approximate hour of twelve midnight, had been stabbed into the body to the depth of four and a half inches by some sharp instrument whereof he had instantly died. Moreover, inasmuch as he had died by the act and will of some person or persons unknown, it was, therefore, clearly and beyond all doubt or cavil soever to be adjudged and declared a case of Wilful Murder against the said person or persons unknown."

The law thus fulfilled, coroner, jury and spectators betook themselves back whence they had come. And so the enquiry ended, to David's inexpressible relief, whereto was presently added an increasing wonder; insomuch that, espying Mr. Maulverer among the dispersing crowd, he approached and touched him on the shoulder, whereupon that gentleman swung round with look so fierce and wild, so utterly different from his usual air of stately dignity and dark repression, that David recoiled instinctively:

"Your pardon!" said he, "I fear I startled you?"

"Yes . . . no! . . . I was lost in thought! What do you want?"

"A word apart," said David.

"My way lies across the meadow yonder."

Silently they crossed a stile and silently they walked together until, reaching a spot where they were hidden from the road, Mr. Maulverer halted.

"Now, sir?" he demanded.

Said David, "I beg to know why in your evidence to-day you withheld all mention of my first meeting with Sir Nevil Loring?"

Mr. Maulverer glanced at David with his expression of sombre aloofness, while his long, white fingers toyed with the snowy frills at his bosom.

"That, sir, is my concern!" he answered.

"And mine also, I venture to think," said David. "It was not by reason of the overpowering goodwill you bear to me, I fear."

Mr. Maulverer's sardonic smile was an eloquent answer.

"You are at liberty to assume it was, sir," he smiled. "I refrained from exposing you to an odious notoriety and risks infinitely worse, from pure good-fellowship."

"You are pleased to be satirical, sir!" said David, flushing. "None the less I duly acknowledge the service."

"We will take your gratitude for granted, sir. At the same time might I suggest you would find any other part of England more suited to your peculiar temperament."

"Possibly, sir — but I find the country hereabouts charmingly agreeable and have not been here long enough to weary."

"None the less, sir, I almost think you were wiser to — go."

"Is this a threat?" enquired David, gently.

"Let us rather say — advice — for your own good."

"Your interest in my welfare is flattering, sir. . . . But indeed, sensible as I am of the service you rendered me to-day in withholding my name from your testimony, I do confess myself puzzled to account for your silence . . . under the circumstances."

"Sir, I speak or am silent as I think fit!"

"Precisely!" retorted David. "For instance, sir, it would be vastly interesting to know how much you might tell in regard to a certain silver-hilted stiletto."

Mr. Maulverer's stately figure seemed to shrink oddly; his eyes stared, while his face flushed from white to scarlet and from scarlet to a deadly pallor; twice it seemed he would have spoken, but instead he turned suddenly and hurried away; once he stumbled over some inequality of the ground but sped on, all unheeding, like one who fled some great and impending danger. . . . But, while David yet watched, he turned suddenly and came hasting back again:

"Sir," said he, speaking in a voice David hardly recognised, so low and shaken was it, "sir . . . whatever you chance to know concerning that fatal weapon, I would . . . most humbly beg . . . implore you to mention it to no one . . . to no one . . . or you will surely bitterly regret it. . . . O, bitterly!"

Then, in the same wild, disordered fashion, he turned and hasted on his way.

And so, in the fullness of time, upon a fair, sunny afternoon, all that was earthly of Sir Nevil Loring was borne to the tomb of his ancestors, watched by a crowd of staring rustics from Loring and the neighbouring villages, of burly farmers, with country squires and gentry from near and far; a solemn, whispering, motley company, but, one and all, thither drawn by morbid curiosity, a sordid interest in one whose final exit had been so dramatic, so sensational, so mysterious!

"In the midst of life we are in death!"

Perfectly true, to be sure! But how very pleasant to be alive that one might shiver so deliciously, stealing a glance from the shade of the coquettish bonnet or modish hat-brim, towards the sombre velvet pall whose heavy, sullen folds draped that poor, blood-stained clay.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust!"

How horribly loud the rattling of falling earth!

"I am the resurrection and the life!" . . .

So many ears to hear, so many eyes to see, and never a sob or pitying tear . . . no, not one!

Thus, then, they laid Sir Nevil Loring to his long repose, hid him alike from the kindly sun and the curious stare of all those unpitying eyes. Which done, the spectators, decorously murmurous, moved away and were presently gone, homing to country mansion, to solitary farm or clustered cottage, there to discuss again the entrancing and horrible mystery in all its gruesome details, to shiver daintily, nod wisely, or formulate profound theories according to their many and various mentalities.

At last, the church being empty, came David where, newly carven upon a timeworn stone, he might read the legend:

Sacred to the Memory

of

Sir Nevil Loring of Loring, Sussex

Aged 52

Thirteenth Baronet.

Now as David stood thus, leaning in the shade of a pillar, arms folded upon his bosom, he started at the sound of quick, light footsteps and beheld Mrs. Belinda, who, all unconscious of his presence, sank to her knees before that ancient monument, her slight, girlish form convulsed with painful sobs, her white head bowed upon frail hands in a passion of woe, while from her unseen lips issued a hurry of words in tender, whispering voice shaken by her grief:

"O, Nevil — Nevil! You were wicked to her . . . cruel — ah, bitterly cruel to poor me . . . but now — now that you are dead . . . O, Nevil — Nevil . . . my love follows you . . . is with you still . . . always, Nevil, always and . . . for ever!"

Softly, reverently, David crept away; for the dead had found one to mourn him at last, one to sob and shed a pitying tear, after all.

CHAPTER XXXII

The People's Practitioner Philosophises on Physic

Early morning with a broad beam of sunshine flooding in at the open lattice; and as if borne upon this glory came a merry whistling, very clear and sweet and full of unexpected flourishes and grace notes; insomuch that David paused in his dressing to thrust tousled head out of window. In the quiet yard, almost immediately below, was a little man in snowy shirt-sleeves, black velvet smalls and Hessian boots, very busy at a large table whereon were ranged rows upon rows of small bottles or phials; these he was filling with a dark-brown liquid which he ladled from a bucket; and all with such rapid dexterity, such nicety and precision as was a wonder to behold. At length, every phial having received its exact allowance, the little man set by bucket and ladle and had reached a handful of corks from the bag beside him when, chancing to glance upwards, he espied David, whereupon off came his broad-brimmed hat in salutation.

"A glorious morning, Mr. Peabody!" said David.

"Glorious indeed, sir! I trust your liver, that noble organ, is sufficiently resilient to permit of your just appreciation of so fair a morn?"

"You have forgotten me, I guess, Mr. Peabody!"

"Indeed, sir, I see countless faces, physionomies aplenty per diem. . . . However! Let me think."

"In Loring Wood!" suggested David, "and it was my head, not liver."

"Ah, to be sure! Though thou 'rt changed, methinks, *corpore sano* . . . hum! Your appearance is enhanced by outer application *aqua pura* and a shaven jowl. And how goes the cracked pericranium? Better?"

"Thanks to your kindness!"

"Rather say to my corn cure. And how are you personally — stomach, for instance?"

"Empty!" laughed David.

"Descend, then, and let us fill it. You shall breakfast with me — my welcome guest ——"

"No, no," said David.

"Yes, yes!" cried Mr. Peabody. "Aho, Tom! Within there, Thomas!" he called.

"Yes, Mus' Peabody!" And out from a small, unexpected window popped landlord Tom's bullet head.

"More eggs and rashers, Tom, I've an empty guest ——"

"No, no!" cried David from above.

"Yes, yes!" cried Peabody from below, ramming corks at remarkable speed. "Eating in company aids digestion — result, comfort and good fellowship. Gobbling alone clogs the vital organs, promoting dyspepsia . . . result, misery, malevolence and murder! And talking of murder ——"

"Don't!" said David.

"Very good!" answered Mr. Peabody. "Perhaps when you 're ready you 'll come down and cork a bottle or so?"

"With pleasure!" answered David. And presently, his toilet achieved, he joined Mr. Peabody in the yard. "And pray," he enquired, surveying the very many small bottles, "do these contain the famous corn cure?"

"They do!" rejoined Mr. Peabody, "though with a slight difference, for by the addition of a certain tincture the corn cure becomes Peabody's Priceless

Purgative, the Stomach's Succour or Seasonable Stomachic, gentle as a southern zephyr, searching as an east wind, efficacious as an earthquake. One tablespoonful after meals and life becomes a melody, a glad, sweet song. And all for one shilling, or three bottles for eighteen pence. . . . Ha, you smile, I think?"

"Forgive me, Mr. Peabody, but your alliteration ——"

"Is an aid, sir! People like alliterative titles in the same way as they like their medicine to look and smell and taste like medicine, and I give 'em what they desire. . . . And look'ee, young man, I 'm no quack . . . at least, I quack but gently. . . . However! Were all the medicines sold to an innocent and eager public as wholesome as Peabody's specifics the world would be a happier place and less full of evil. . . . And, talking of evil——"

"Don't!" said David. "Tell me rather of yourself."

"Why, then, sir, I am very well, thanks to Heaven and an active liver! Business flourishes, particularly as regards the Purgative. Indeed, there has been such a demand for it at the fair that I was forced to hasten back here — (I leave my drugs, herbs and simples in Tom's charge) — hurry back, as I say, and brew a fresh joram. Also the Corn Cure is eagerly sought, and my Pills for the Pallid have been snapped up by the Sex with an avidity remarkable. Now, should you think of joining me, young man, I can keep you busy morning, noon and night and pay you as much as one guinea per week to begin! Think it over."

Here out popped landlord Tom's head again to announce:

"Breakfus' be a-waiting, gen'lemen."

So in they went forthwith; and a truly appetising meal they found set out upon a fair white cloth, ham and eggs and fragrant coffee very grateful to the nostrils of a hungry man.

"And now, sir," quoth the Poor Person's Practitioner as they sat down:

"May good digestion wait on appetite;
If not, Peabody's Purge will put you right!"

Here for a space was an eloquent silence.

"The secret of all good medicine, sir," said Mr. Peabody at last, fork a-flourish, "the secret of each and every successful specific for the alleviation of corporeal woes is H_2O with as much Mystery as possible. Ah, mystery is the thing! The human mind, sir, reveres whatsoever it cannot understand, puts off its shoes and bows its addle-head to Mystery! . . . Hence your quacks, wizards, necromancers, priests, ay, and philosophers — such as Pythagoras, who lectured from the mystery of a drawn curtain. . . . Be a fool the most egregious, or rogue ingrain and sufficiently mysterious, and you shall be reverenced, followed, quoted and generally remarked. Be wise and simply good, scorning all shallow trickery, artifice or affectation, and the crowd will pass you by unheeded. . . . However! . . . But, talking of mysteries, this dismal affair of Sir Nev——"

"The mystery to me," said David hastily, "is how you will contrive to carry so many bottles as far as Lewes Fair?"

"Very simply, young man. I have bespoken Jim Crook's pony and cart. Now, as to yourself — do you become a disciple of Æsculapius, following in the footsteps of Galen, Hippocrates and Peabody, at one guinea per week? Ay or no?"

"Thank you sincerely for your offer, but——"

"You won't!" nodded Mr. Peabody. "Ha! Corns, coughs, colds and colics being not sufficiently romantic for your aspiring and soaring soul — eh, sir?"

"Indeed," answered David, "I feel myself so lacking in——"

"Hold! As your friend and well-wisher, sir, let me suggest that you learn to speak with accent a little less bleat-like."

"Sir?" exclaimed David, flushing. "If you allude to my——"

"I do!" nodded the People's Practitioner, "You bleat, sir! Affected and outlandish speech is remarkable and apt to prejudice the vulgar ear against you. Moreover, to be remarkable in any way — except for business purposes — argues either a blatant ostentation or preposterous self-esteem. . . . And now you are offended, I presume? However!"

"No, indeed!" answered David, and laughed.

"Glad of it, sir, for anger is so much waste of energy which is life. The passion of anger being highly inflaming to the——"

"O, Mus' Peabody, if you please — axing your pardin', I 'm sure!"

On the threshold a buxom, neat-clad damsel stood curtseying, whom Mr. Peabody gravely saluted.

"Well, Mary Bybrook?" he enquired.

"O, please, sir, was the stuff as Grandfer got from you in the li'l bottle for 'is cough or 'is corns?"

"His corns, Mary. They are soothed and I trust forgotten by this?"

"Lor, Mus' Peabody, I dunno. . . . Ye see, Grandfer went an' took it — swallered it arl . . . in three gollops 'e did!"

"Ah, indeed?" said the People's Practitioner, no whit perturbed, "swallowed it, did he, child?"

"Every drop, sir! Grandfer be an 'og wi' medicine sure-ly!"

"Truly medicine seems a vice with him."

"But wot about 'is pore old innards, sir?"

"How did it affect him?"

"Wonnerful, sir! Went an' sat 'isself in the pig-pen an' sang, 'e did!"

"Sang, eh, Mary?"

"Ay, so merry as a grig, sir! Said it done 'un a power o' good."

"Quite so!" nodded the Poor People's Practitioner. "This is one of the many virtues of Peabody's Corn Cure — it may be taken anyhow, at any time, in or out."

"But there bean't no corns in Grandfer's stummick sure-ly, sir?"

"Nor ever will be now, Mary, rest assured."

"Why, then, sir, 'e do want another bottle if you 'll be so kind."

Out stepped the People's Practitioner forthwith and presently returned bearing one of the newly charged phials; quoth he:

"Let your grandfather take a tablespoonful of this after meals; it will sit as comfortably on his ancient stomach as the Corn Cure and be more palatable in the taking."

"O, thank'ee kindly, sir!" And the buxom Mary curtseyed and tendered a shilling in payment. Mr. Peabody took it, glanced at it and gave it back.

"Child," said he, "since your grandfather is so very aged you shall pay me half-price, give me sixpence — nay, give me a groat."

"Well, sir?" he demanded of David when the girl had departed vociferous with gratitude. "Well, sir, and why glare at me?"

"O, surely, sir, to so deceive these innocent folk is a crime!" said David. "Why impose thus upon their ignorance?"

Mr. Peabody sighed and, leaning back in his chair, surveyed David a little wistfully:

"Sir," said he, "you shall be answered. Once upon a time, sir, I was rich, as young as you and consequently a fool! Being young, rich and a fool I committed three preposterous solecisms: I married a woman

for her beauty, made friend of a rogue, and bought race-horses — with the very natural result that my horses ruined me, my wife deserted me and my rascally friend shot me through the lung, which last happily caused me to forget my mundane sorrows a while . . . However! . . . Upon my recovery, being destitute and consequently friendless, I grew desperate and sought forgetfulness . . . in the slime, sir. Down went I and down into such sordid filth as only we higher animals may ever descend to; the nobler horse or dog would ha' perished. . . . However! . . . But there, among that festering flotsam of humanity, I found Salvation, a flower on a dung-hill, a thing of Heaven unsoiled as yet. . . . She was six years old and dying of neglect and ill-usage. We fled together — out and away to the green fields and fragrant woods and lived as we might, starving when we must, but she was used to that, and I — was a man at last. . . . I had dallied with medicine in my languid college days. . . . And thus it befell that, in a cottage in Patcham Village which nestles under the Down above Brighton, was evolved upon this terrestrial sphere that now justly celebrated panacea Peabody's Pills for the Pallid. . . . The years have rolled since then; to-day my hair is grey and she is sixteen, finishing her education at an Academy in Brighton, but yearning, yes — yearning to mother-and-daughter me in the cottage we have dreamed of hereabouts . . . for she is my Salvation still, and will be . . . unto the end. . . . So you 'll perceive, sir, that if I quack now and then, I quack but gently, to nobody's hurt . . . and in good cause. . . . Now, talking of crime ——"

"Sir," said David, "I am answered and . . . there is my hand!"

"And at the door," said Mr. Peabody as their fingers gripped, "is Jim Crook's young man with the cart. Perhaps you will help me to load up my Stomachic?"

After some while, the very many bottles being stowed securely in the vehicle, Mr. Peabody climbed in, gathered up the reins and, glancing down at David, patted the seat invitingly:

"A fine morning for a ride!" said he. "And I should much like your company." So David mounted, Mr. Peabody chirrupped to the pony, and off they went at a smart trot.

"Talking of crime," said Mr. Peabody again, "I am probably one of the last who saw Sir Nevil Loring alive and walking abroad on that fatal night."

"Indeed?" said David.

"A splenetic creature of ungoverned passions who, but for me, would have murdered his own head keeper."

"You mean the man Yaxley?"

"The same. . . . It chanced that, being short of a certain herb, *Nasturtium officinale*, vulgarly known as watercress, I went that evening along the stream where I knew it grew prolific. While engaged in gathering the herb I was disturbed by one approaching, and beheld Yaxley muttering to himself and cherishing some object between his huge hands. He had reached a spot opposite my post of observation when he started about with a sort of leap at the sound of two words very softly uttered: 'Treacherous animal!' Sir, I have never heard two words carry such deadly malevolence! . . . And out from the bushes limped Sir Nevil Loring, with the very face of smiling Murder. And seeing this face, Yaxley's legs seemed to give way, for down he plumped upon his knees. 'Ay, grovel, obscene beast, grovel!' said Sir Nevil, 'For, by God, I mean to end you here and now!' And I saw he had a small pistol in his fist. 'Master,' whined Yaxley, 'don't go for to murder me!' 'And why not, vermin?' smiled Sir Nevil, 'I overheard your threats . . . and beside, you have ceased to be useful. . . . You have failed too often! I'm done with you!' And then,

as Sir Nevil raised his arm, I cried out and ran in between 'em. I don't mind what I said, but I do remember Sir Nevil waving me aside, scarcely troubling to glance at me, and pointing to the object Yaxley had dropped, a small, thin-bladed dagger with a silver handle. 'Bring it to me, Beast!' says he, and Yaxley, crawling on his knees, gave it to him. 'Where did you get this very pretty thing?' enquired Sir Nevil, turning it over in his hand. 'I found it in the wood, master.' 'Aha!' says Sir Nevil, staring at the thing as if it pleased him, 'Now heark'ee, my brute, I'll give you one more chance . . . succeed to-night! Fail again, and by Heaven I'll shoot you for the venomous thing you are!' Then he turned and hobbled off, and presently Yaxley crept away, too. . . . But, if ever Death glared out of a man's eyes——! Ah, if I had n't intervened, Yaxley would assuredly be a corpse —— However! Though, mark me, young man, keep you a silent tongue! I've no desire to be dragged into the business or questioned in a coroner's court, or any other—I've had my fill o' courts! So mum 's the word——"

"Yes!" said David, "Yes! I shall say nothing! . . . And Sir Nevil . . . took the dagger with him?"

"Ay, he did . . . I've thought 't would be queer if the weapon that let his evil life out should have been that same . . . ay, a very queer thing! However! . . . Oho! An elderly female signals us . . . beckons you, I think——"

CHAPTER XXXIII

Concerning a Ghost that Limped

"How may I serve you, mam?" enquired David, bowing to the small, ancient lady who sat upon the grassy bank beside the way.

"Easily, sir!" answered the Duchess, with an imperious gesture. "Sit you here beside me in this sanity o' sunshine and listen to an insane question. . . . So! You are comfortable? Warm with this grateful radiance? Listening — with both ears? Now then! Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Hedges?"

"Ghosts, mam?"

"Yes! Ghosts, goblins, apparitions, spectres, phantoms, visions, manifestations, the disembodied spirits o' the dead?"

"No, lady."

"No!" repeated the Duchess, "Of course not! Neither do I! At least — I thought I did not . . . and yet . . . mm! . . . What a truly beautiful morning! What a glory of sun! Of course we don't believe in ghosts! But — were it black midnight . . . the 'witching hour' again . . . I wonder?"

"Pray, madam, what do you mean?"

"That in the black darkness of an ancient house fouled with recent crime one's nerves may play one tricks — even mine."

"Do I understand you have been frightened, mam?"

"Certainly not, sir! I have never feared anything all my life except cows and mice — the monsters! . . . I have been — thrilled, sir . . . yes, thrilled is the word."

"By what, mam?"

"Sounds, sir! Unaccountable noises in the dark . . . nocturnal footsteps! Footsteps very strangely reminiscent."

"How so, lady?"

"Well, did you ever hear tell of a ghost that — limped?"

"No . . . never, mam!"

"Of course you did n't. And yet I heard one last night, sir — soft, stealthy feet . . . that limped! . . ."

"When, madam? And where?"

"At midnight, and somewhere behind the panelling . . . And this sun so very sane and glorious! O, fiddlesticks! A scurry of rats in the wainscot. . . . And yet — dear me! When I recall it I am actually cold despite the sunshine, which is remarkable . . . and very ridiculous, to be sure. Though how any rats could make sounds so dreadfully like . . . feet . . . limping . . . O tush, sir . . . we don't believe in ghosts — especially on such a radiant morning — do we?"

"No, lady!" answered David, and yet as he spoke he felt himself unpleasantly cold despite the warm sun.

"*À propos* of ghosts, sir," continued the Duchess, loosening her bonnet-strings, "Sir Nevil in his will has constituted me guardian to his young virago."

"Meaning, mam?"

"His graceless *protégée*."

"I beg your ladyship's pardon?"

"I allude, sir, to that headstrong termagant, that detestable young shrew whom he labelled with the pagan name of Anticlea."

"Your language is — is — unmeasured, lady."

"Like herself, sir, she promises infinite capacities for evil ——"

"Or good, madam — like each one of us."

"Perhaps, sir. But as she is to-day ——"

"To-day, madam, is but the result of many yesterdays —— thwarted, teased and tormented from her youth for the sport of a malevolent creature who made her childish furies his delight ——"

"You are an eloquent advocate, sir, and one strangely well informed, I think."

"Nature gave me ears, mam ——"

"And eyes too, sir. And red hair may appeal to you ——"

"Madam!" exclaimed David, attempting to rise.

"Mr. Hedgerow!" quoth the Duchess, holding him down, "I have you by the buttonhole, so pray sit still or you will quite dislocate my finger. Pray sit still and let us discuss Anticlea — she is a subject wakes you to eloquence . . . a wild young creature so entirely impossible of management that I am quite determined to manage her. . . . I am resolved to tame her, to exorcise the devil in her and wake the woman, and, Mr. Hedges, you shall aid me!"

"I, madam?" gasped David . . . "I?"

"To the which end, I here and now appoint you bailiff to the estates of Loring at a salary to be agreed later."

"But . . . but —" stammered David, "this . . . this is incredible, madam — unheard of ——"

"You hear now, sir, since Nature gave you ears!"

"And quite . . . impossible!"

"I have found few things impossible hitherto, sir."

"But, lady, you — you know nothing about me . . . my capabilities . . . my worthiness ——"

"Tush, sir! Should you prove incompetent or a thief I can deal with you accordingly! So, then, consider the matter settled subject to our agreeing your remuneration, but this can wait. Now as to Sir Nevil's will ——"

"I should tell your Grace that I happen to have heard something of it already."

"Ho!" exclaimed the Duchess. "From whom, pray?"

"From Mr. Shrig of Bow Street, mam."

"Ha! An impertinent, prying person in top-boots. And he dared tell you of Sir Nevil's will?"

"Feeling it his duty, mam, he showed me an extract——"

"Hum! That abominable part, I suppose: 'In the hope that two felines may flesh their claws, each on each'? . . . How like Nevil! . . . It is some consolation to remember that I slapped him frequently in his youth, though not hard enough, of course! And yet . . . how well he knew the Sex! Men of his hateful character always do! . . . For instance, at breakfast this morning the dear child was itching to scratch me—I mean Anticlea, sir."

"To . . . O . . . to . . . scratch you, mam!" gasped David.

"With both hands, Mr. Fields. Had she so much as moved I should have wrenched her red hair down—instantly."

"Heavens, madam!"

"Hell, Mr. Brooks!" corrected the Duchess. "For what hell may justly compare with three solitary females, who have slept badly, eating a breakfast they do not want, and striving to talk platitudinous politenesses when they are aching to scream—well, sir?"

"Madam . . . I—I do not apprehend."

"How old are you, Mr. Brooks?"

"Twenty-four, mam."

"Knowledge will come, sir—with time. Hysteria is a very profound subject that dull man can understand only by a long, hard apprenticeship and painful application. You will be wiser in many ways in another—fifty years or so. As to Anticlea, she presents difficulties that my spirit rises to, 'sniffing the battle afar,' as it were. She is just twenty and must remain

my ward until she is twenty-five. I look forward with keen anticipation, therefore, to five years of ceaseless strife, turmoil, stratagem and counter-plot. My strength is renewed within me, my youth returns . . . the combat is preparing, the field is set. . . . And there she is! . . . No, no — owl! Yonder — behind the hedge."

Glancing thither he saw Anticlea approaching, sure enough, as fresh and fair as the morning itself; she was walking slowly, her shapely head a-droop, like one lost in dreamy reverie.

Quoth the Duchess:

"Ha, the sly minx has seen us and pretends she has n't! Observe the unconscious grace of her, the languor of her walk! Now . . . that studied carelessness of pose! See, being well aware that she has a passable profile she now turns it for our behoof . . . the baggage!"

"Madam!" exclaimed David, attempting to rise again.

"Mr. Meadows!" quoth the Duchess, grasping his coat-tail, "sit still and attend, for I perceive a skirmish is imminent!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

In which Two Felines Flesh their Claws

Duchess (calling in dulcet tones of tender affection): Anticlea, my love! (Anticlea starts and turns with so charmingly natural an air of surprise that David, rising to his feet, still fast grappled by the Duchess, immediately spurns that lady's base insinuations.)

Anticlea (in voice soft as cooing dove): La, dear madam, how you startled me!

Duchess (beckoning her to approach): And you startle so very charmingly, my precious. . . . You are acquainted with my friend Mr. Hedges, I think?

Anticlea (seeming to notice David for the first time): Hedges, dear madam?

Duchess: So he informs me. An excellent name for the country — so very much in keeping with things rural! But you know each other, of course?

Anticlea (appearing gently surprised): O indeed, madam?

Duchess: So Mr. Hedges informs me.

Anticlea: I think I have seen him before.

(Here David bows profoundly.)

Duchess (tugging slyly at David's coat-tail): Then pray sit down . . . both of you. Indeed, you are such tall creatures it gives me a crick in the neck to look up at you. So be seated one on either side of me.

David (a little stiffly): Thank you, mam, but if you will pardon me ——

DUCHESS (tugging harder): Sir — sit!

(David glances round with a helpless air and obeys.)

DUCHESS (to Anticlea): Now you, my sweet.

ANTICLEA: Thank you, dear Duchess, but I prefer to stand.

DUCHESS (eyeing her fondly): And indeed a charming picture you make, my love . . . that so simple 'tire moulding your beautiful — though robust — proportions! . . . A very sylph, eh, Mr. Hedges? Yet no — sylphs are slimmer! A rustic nymph? Scarcely! Nymphs never wore stockings, of course — Your left one is inclined to wrinkle over the ankle, my dearest!

ANTICLEA (flushed with sudden vexation): O indeed, madam?

DUCHESS: And that pretty gown — fie! I must really get you a French maid, child.

ANTICLEA (between shut teeth): Pray what 's amiss with my gown, mam?

DUCHESS: Dips alarmingly behind, dearest.

(Anticlea subsides suddenly in a billow of muslin.)

ANTICLEA (frowning): I meant to ride my Brutus this morning but ——

DUCHESS (patting Anticlea's hand affectionately): Knowing I disapprove of your mounting the wicked creature you came a-walking instead. Sweet, amiable child! Such dutiful submission touches me sensibly. Positively I must kiss you, love. (Anticlea hesitates, frowns, stoops suddenly and they peck each other on each cheek.)

ANTICLEA (haughtily): And now, dearest madam, perhaps you will inform me what has become of my saddle?

DUCHESS: I told the groom to hide it, pet.

ANTICLEA: Yes, madam! So I sent the coachman to buy me another.

DUCHESS: Indeed, love, I expected you would, so I hid Brutus as well.

ANTICLEA: Hid him, madam?

DUCHESS: Or rather, I sent him away to one of my farms in Kent.

ANTICLEA (amazed and angry): Sent my Brutus away? You —— O, how dared you ——!

DUCHESS: Quite easily, child.

ANTICLEA (rising to knees in sudden fury): He shall be brought back! . . . He shall, I say!

DUCHESS (sweetly): So he shall, my love, after you are married. Until then I am responsible for your welfare and ——

ANTICLEA (fiercely determined): I tell you again, madam, I'll not be married!

DUCHESS: Certainly not, dearest, until I have selected you the proper mate.

ANTICLEA (contemptuously): You, madam? You, indeed! Have I no say in the matter?

DUCHESS: Why, of course, pet . . . you shall say whatever you like . . . afterwards.

ANTICLEA (making to rise and go): Afterwards, indeed! I tell you I . . . I . . . you . . . O!

DUCHESS: Meanwhile, my 'Clea, what do you say to Mr. Hedges —— Pray sit still, sir! (Anticlea sits down again suddenly, to stare in amazement.)

ANTICLEA (seeming to gasp): Mr. . . . Hedges?

DUCHESS: I mean, of course, as the agent or bailiff to your estates, child. I was proposing the matter to him when you appeared.

ANTICLEA (gazing curiously at David, who seems more uncomfortable than ever): And what does Mr. . . . Hedges say?

DUCHESS: Nothing beyond a stammering confession of his utter incapacity. The question is, what say you, my sweet?

ANTICLEA: Have you made up your mind, madam?

DUCHESS: I have.

ANTICLEA: Then what say have I in the matter?

Duchess: None at all, my love. But I should be happy to know you agreed in my decision.

Anticlea: Then I suppose you have decided to offer him the position?

Duchess: No, child. I have decided he shall accept the position. Have you anything against this?

Anticlea: 'T were no matter if I had, it seems.

Duchess: None in the least, dear — except to prove you wrong.

Anticlea (sullenly): You have done that ever since you came.

Duchess: How sweet of you to acknowledge this!

David (flushed and self-conscious, making another attempt at escape): Ladies, if you will excuse me . . . I think ——

Duchess (holding him firmly): Thinking needs no excuse, sir. . . . Have you anything to urge against Mr. Hedges' appointment, my love?

Anticlea (wearily): O, none at all, madam, your choice is mine.

Duchess: Sweet, dutiful child!

Anticlea: Since you leave me none ——

David (speaking with utmost determination and hence with accent more perceptible than usual): Thank you for your offer, mam, but I beg to decline firmly, most firmly. I have never for one moment dreamed of accepting ——

Duchess: So then it is quite settled, you will begin your duties at once, Mr. Hedges.

David: But, mam, you do not understand me ——

Duchess: Quite!

David: I have no intention of ——

Duchess: David Hedgerow — fiddesticks! I won't permit David's ridiculous pride to interfere with the prospects of Mr. Meadows!

David (feebly): But indeed, mam ——

DUCHESS: Tush! I shall appoint Mr. Hedges to the position despite all the Davids in the world.

ANTICLEA (petulantly): And now, pray, what of my horse, madam? What of my Brutus?

DUCHESS: I believe there are several good horses in the stable, and all at your service, my dear.

ANTICLEA (angrily): But I want Brutus . . . I insist on his instant return.

DUCHESS: Quite impossible, my love — unless I proceed to marry you at once ——

ANTICLEA (furiously): This is a physical impossibility, thank God.

DUCHESS: — To some miserable male, my sweet.

ANTICLEA (raging): O madam, pray, madam, give me leave to assure you that I defy and detest you — and all your works. (Anticlea springs to her feet and hurries away tempestuous.)

"Alas," exclaimed Her Grace, watching Anticlea's departure with smiling eyes, "alas, my poor grandnephew!"

"Who, mam?" enquired David.

"I allude to the Marquis of Jerningham, her spouse-to-be, sir. For years I have been marrying him, but at last . . . well . . . yonder goes his wife."

"Not yet, mam!" David demurred.

"A mere matter o' time, sir! She will at least make a handsome marchioness. . . . And now, sir," said the Duchess, rising nimbly, "pray lend me your arm along the road. Mr. Maulverer will be awaiting us with the necessary papers and documents bearing on the business of the estate."

"But — but, madam ——" stammered David.

"I told him to expect us about midday, sir."

"As to which, mam, permit me to — to assure you ——"

"I am assured, sir — quite, I usually have been."

"If you will suffer me to speak, mam ——"

"Say on, Mr. Hedges."

"Then pray understand, mam, that I have no intention of accepting this ——"

"I do, Mr. Hedges, I do. I am addressing myself to Mr. David. And having made up my mind to engage David, all the Hedges, Ditches, Fields and Meadows in the world shall not gainsay me . . . the thing is settled! And so, Mr. David, as the new Agent, Bailiff, Factor, and General Man o' Business of the Loring Estates, come and get acquainted with your new duties — and Mr. Maulverer. You have met him, perhaps?"

"Yes, mam. But ——"

"And what do you think of him?"

David sighed, laughed and capitulated.

"Mr. Maulverer is surely a very — estimable gentleman, lady."

"And pray why don't you like him?" enquired the Duchess, glancing at David with her shrewd, youthful-seeming eyes.

"Why, mam . . . you . . . indeed, you are mistaken. My feelings for the gentleman are purely negative."

"So bad as that, sir? Mm! I'll grant you he is a little . . . difficult, perhaps, which is owing to his prideful poverty and therefore to be overlooked. Personally, I know him for an admirable youth . . . he can be very little older than you, Mr. David . . . and of unexceptional birth and breeding. I would have you his friend if possible, for he is also a lonely youth — pride, poverty and loneliness are usually close companions. . . . And then to be sure he hated Sir Nevil — very wholesomely!"

"Indeed, mam?"

"Of course — though with more cause than the majority of folk. Our poor Maulverer suffers by reason of a fatuous father who had the bad taste to choose

Nevil Loring for a friend, the worse judgment to quarrel with him, and the suicidal madness to go to law. Naturally enough Nevil ruined him . . . Nevil loved to torture flies and other small creatures as a boy; when he grew up the passion intensified and the animals were — larger! . . . Murder may seem scarcely a sin . . . sometimes! You agree, sir?"

"Yes!" said David, scowling fiercely. "Yes!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Duchess, clasping his arm a little tighter, "I believe we are both potential murderers."

"Who is not, mam, if danger or a . . . a vile evil threaten?"

"Mm!" quoth Her Grace, with another keen glance. "So the Maulverers were ruined and Eustace is a beggar. . . . I knew his mother intimately, a sweet, languishing creature who swooned to Fortune's rude buffets with a constancy nothing could shake, and before which even pipe-puffing, beetle-browed bailiffs' men have quailed apologetic. . . . And yonder comes the Bow Street person — in a gig! Pray waft him to stop."

Obedient to David's gesture, Mr. Shrig pulled up the fast-trotting horse he drove, and removing his shaggy-napped hat flourished it in cheery, though respectful salutation.

"Good morning, Your Grace, an' glad I am to be'old you so werry blooming, mam — ay, blooming's the vord! Yourself likevise, Mr. 'Edges!"

The Duchess met Mr. Shrig's placid benignity with a sudden smile.

"You have advertised for the man Thomas Yaxley?" she enquired.

"Vich, mam, I 'ave, you may tak' your oath on that if so inclined — 'axing your parding. The bills and placards, mam, should be all ready this here werry arternoon."

"You have no news of the wretch, I suppose, officer?"

"Not vot you might eggsackly call 'noos', Your Grace, mam. Though things is beginning to look up, things is reasonable spry, mam. Gimme a few more days and I 'opes to clap my mauleys or — as you might say — daddles, mam, on the guilty party. Roses don't bloom in a day, mam, nor butter come immediate from the cow. I ain't never been beat yet, Your Grace, except by Death, mam. Death 'as diddled me now an' then — snatched my Capital Bird out o' my werry fingers or — as you might say — 'ooks, my lady, an' left me only a corp' for my pains, vich is 'eart-breaking to a man as takes a pride in 'is perfession. But Death's a tough customer 'owever you tackles 'im, and no error! Ay, Death's robbed me afore now . . . that 'ere 'Gaunt' murder, two year ago . . . Jarsper Gaunt, you'll mind the case, I think, mam?"

"To be sure I do!" nodded the Duchess, "You mean that villainous money lender who had ruined so many. . . . The case was very similar to this, Mr. Shrig, a knife-blow — struck at random ——"

"But murder, mam, random or no!" demurred Mr. Shrig. "The Capital Act, my lady! And — struck by 'oo, or 'ow — to be proceeded against according, in doo form and as dooty bids, mam. For the law, lady, is the law and ——"

"Has been called an ass!" the Duchess added.

"A nass, mam, a nass?" repeated Mr. Shrig, placidly reproachful. "Vich all I says is, let them as so calls remember a nass 'as oncommon long ears and beware according."

"Then perhaps the law's great ears have heard something about a ghost?"

"A ghost, mam?" Mr. Shrig seemed to ponder the question.

"Yourself, man," exclaimed the Duchess, "have

you heard anything? At least do you believe in ghosts?"

"Why no, mam, no — leastways only them as 'appens to — limp!"

"Ah — so you have heard of it, then?"

"Information, lady, 'as been laid agin' a limpin' ghost, specketer or apparation by Old Jole, surname Bybrook — though to be sure he's a werry ancient article and inclined to be vot they calls, in these parts, 'doddlish.'"

"Well, am I 'doddlish,' Mr. Shrig?" demanded the Duchess, with a flash of her quick, bright eyes and jut of indomitable chin. Mr. Shrig's answer was instant and sufficiently decisive.

"Not by no manner o' means you ain't, mam!"

"Then I will lay another information against this limping ghost, for I have heard it!"

"Heard it?" repeated Mr. Shrig, his eyes growing suddenly round. "O indeed, mam! Wheerabouts, now — and v'en?"

"Last night about midnight — in the house at Loring Chase."

"'Ave ye so, my lady, 'ave ye so?" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, staring very hard at nothing in particular. "And limped, did it, mam, like him as now — ain't?"

"Precisely!" nodded the Duchess.

"Lady," sighed Mr. Shrig, "I should like to 'ark to that their apparition."

"So you shall, perhaps, one of these fine nights," answered the Duchess, suddenly thoughtful. "Limping ghosts are rare, I fancy?"

"And rum, mam, re-markable rum!" nodded Mr. Shrig.

"Well, good morning, Officer, and Fortune attend you."

"It's attendin', mam!" nodded Mr. Shrig, gathering up the reins. "Fortun' or — as you might say —

Luck is a-sittin' along wi' me at this here werry minute! . . . Good morning, your Grace and sir—good morning!"

And as Mr. Shrig drove on his way David heard him whistling cheerily.

Quoth the Duchess as they walked on again:

"You and I, sir, as potential homicides, should naturally be curious as to the actual criminal. . . . Now, who do you suppose perpetrated this so extremely human deed? Who was the author of Nevil's sudden end?"

David sighed and, averting his eyes, shook his head.

"Yaxley is the most apparently so. . . . You agree, sir?"

"Yes, mam."

"Though Maulverer is perhaps the more probable. . . . Agreed, sir?"

"Why — why, mam," stammered David, "I cannot in honour say anything to the disparagement of ——"

"Tush, sir! Now, speaking as a possible murderess myself, I should say the most likely of all is . . . Wherefore must you blench and tremble, sir?"

"Who, mam — who?"

"Why such anxiety —— ?"

"O, madam, pray what do you know? How much do you guess? . . . Whom do you mean?"

"Mm!" said the Duchess thoughtfully. . . . "Here we are at Loring already! Come this way, sir, Mr. Maulverer's work-room is at the back."

CHAPTER XXXV

The Duchess Dreams of the Might-have-been

"May I remark, madam," said Mr. Maulverer, as austere and politely impassive as usual, "that such improvements as your Grace suggests will entail the disbursement of a considerable sum of money ——"

"Neglect," retorted the Duchess, "neglect is always expensive sooner or later, Maulverer!"

"Very true, your Grace. . . . But I fear Mr. Hedges' responsibilities will be heavy."

"Well, his shoulders are wide enough, Maulverer, and you will, of course, afford him every assistance."

"Your Grace may rest assured!" murmured the secretary, with a stately inclination of his head.

"Mm!" quoth the Duchess. "You Maulverers were never enthusiasts, I remember. . . . And your years, now? Let me see — you are, I think, twenty-six and an odd month or so?"

"Your ladyship's memory is truly extraordinary!"

"Twenty-six is not a great age, Eustace Maulverer, and yet no Maulverer was ever young. . . . Still, I hope that you and Mr. Hedges may become friends."

The young secretary bowed.

"Your Grace's interest is most gratifying!" he murmured.

"I am interested in most things, thank Heaven!" quoth the Duchess. "And this reminds me — Maulverer, were you disturbed in any way last night?"

"In . . . what manner, your Grace?" he enquired, after a momentary pause.

"By footsteps — behind the panelling, I fancy. Halting feet . . . horribly suggestive."

Mr. Maulverer was fidgeting with the quill he held; and now David saw his eyelids quiver ere he glanced up.

"Suggestive, madam?" he enquired.

"Hatefully! They sounded very like Sir Nevil's limp."

"You . . . amaze me, madam."

"Do I indeed, Eustace? Then you heard nothing?"

The pen escaped Mr. Maulverer's fingers and fell, staining the sheet of paper before him with an ugly blot.

"Nothing, your Grace," he answered, in the same repressed tone.

"And your chamber is next to mine, I think, Eustace?"

"I believe it is, madam."

"And you heard nothing, you say?"

"Nothing, madam."

"You sleep well, Maulverer?"

"Thank you, exceedingly well, madam."

"Then you must be a somnambulist."

Mr. Maulverer started slightly and glanced up beneath slowly wrinkling brows.

"Pray what," he enquired, fidgeting with the quill again, "what should cause your Grace to think so?"

"My ears, sir! For just after the unpleasant sounds had died away I distinctly heard the scrape of a chair in your room and, a moment after, the creak of your casement opening."

The pen broke suddenly in Mr. Maulverer's delicate fingers and he stared down at it with eyes strangely troubled.

"None the less, madam," he answered, after a somewhat awkward silence, "I can only re-asseverate what I have already said."

"Mm!" sighed the Duchess thoughtfully. "Should these weird sounds make themselves heard again, Maulverer, I will rap on the wall with my shoe . . . Mr. Hedges, have you selected what papers you require? Very well . . . I think I once promised to show you a picture; come with me and you shall see it." Mr. Maulverer ushered them to the door with a profound obeisance, but as David bowed in return he saw Mr. Maulverer's right hand was clenched and quivering.

Her Grace muttered something anent "oil and water", and thereafter said no more until, having descended certain stairs and traversed sundry corridors, she led him into a long gallery whose many windows lighted row upon row of portraits.

"These," said she, "are all pictures of Lorings who, when they were not more than ordinarily stupid, were either surprisingly clever or amazingly wicked. . . . They begin here with this one named Humphrey — they are all Humphreys or Nevils or Davids — this unpleasant-looking person in a beard and breast-plate — painted in . . . yes . . . fourteen hundred and seventy."

So David stood to peer up at these his pictured ancestors; ladies in hennin, in ruff and farthingale, men moustachioed, in armour or doublet and hose; bewigged and ruffled gallants, fair dames with gowns cut high or perilously low, who smiled, ogled or languished according to the then prevailing mode. Last of all the Duchess brought him to a certain canvas whence a young exquisite in blue and silver, beruffled hand poised gracefully upon silver hilt, smiled down at them beneath powdered toupet; of face comely and debonair, keen-eyed, firm-lipped, delicately aquiline, a face, indeed, which might have been David's own but for its laughing deviltry.

"This," said the Duchess, glancing from the picture to David and back again, "this was Sir David Loring,

father to Humphrey who was too angelic and Nevil who was altogether diabolic! . . . Yes, this was David — him they called the 'Wild Loring' . . . Poor David! I remember that blue coat. . . . I remember him smiling down at me just so, many and many a time when I was ringletted seventeen instead of bewigged seventy. . . . So long and long ago! The world was very different then! Dear Heaven, how the years do speed away, to be sure! We are hardly alive before it is time to die . . . O, well — I shall be ready, quite, quite ready . . . O, tush and a fiddlestick! Here stands a foolish old woman dreaming o' the might-have-been and babbling o' the lonely yesterdays . . . ! Away sir — begone, Youth, to your duties and pleasures — be off, Mr. David, and leave Age to its empty dreams."

David bowed and then, acting on warm and sudden impulse, caught that so small, mittened hand to his lips and kissed it reverently.

For a moment Her Grace of Camberhurst stood looking up at him with eyes even brighter than usual:

"Why, David Hedges!" she exclaimed at last, "O David, I vow thou 'rt more like . . . even than I dreamed."

CHAPTER XXXVI

Telleth of a Transformation

Mr. Sprowles, meditating sleepily in a rickety chair before his weatherworn cottage, glanced up drowsily at sound of horse-hoofs; but beholding the external changes a week had wrought in the approaching equestrian: as — modish hat, neat-fitting coat and buckskins and immaculate boots, Mr. Sprowles instantly perceived therein so much of "THE QUALITY" that he arose forthwith and ambled to his crazy garden-gate the better to salute their wearer.

"Good afternoon!" said David, reining in the mettled animal he bestrode.

"Thank'ee, sir," answered Mr. Sprowles, doffing his hat to David's nearest boot, "I 'umbly wishes your honour the same indenticle."

"You are the beadle, I think?"

"Which, sir, I be! Name o' Sprowles, sir, at your service!"

"Can you tell me why the villagers avoid me?"

"Well, sir, the folk in these here parts, being mostly ignorammusses, don't take kindly to innoviations nor yet to novelteers, d'ye see . . . and you, sir, axing your parding, are a novelteer and objected to according."

"How so?"

"Well, sir, you 're the noo bailiff, ain't you? Well, the folk hereabout can't nowise abide change no'ow. Ye see, Squire Loring never 'ad no bailiff, stooard, nor yet a-gent ——"

"And consequently, Mr. Sprowles, the whole property is in a very deplorable condition."

"Could n't nowise be no deplorabler, sir! But then the folk hereabouts, being used to such conditions, don't ax for nor yet look for nothing better — sich being beyond their 'umble expectorations!"

"O!" said David. "Indeed?"

"Ah!" nodded the Beadle. "And as sayeth 'Oly Writ: 'Blessed is 'e as expectorateth little!' . . . Take my cottage f'r instance."

"Needs a coat of whitewash!" said David.

"And a noo roof, sir!"

"Ha — leaks, does it?"

"Like a sieve, sir. Likewise the walls is cracked 'ere and theer, the chimbley smokes crool and the stairs ain't safe, otherwise I ain't got no fault to find, for if 't were good enough for me in Squire Nevil's time, 't is good enough now ——"

"Nonsense!" said David, surveying the structure in question, "Miss Anticlea is determined such evil shall be remedied, and it is my duty to see it done . . . though indeed the cottagers themselves seem unwilling to be made comfortable . . . though Heaven alone knows why."

"No, sir, here 's me as knows likewise!" quoth Mr. Sprowles, with portentous nod. "Ye see, sir, though Miss Anticleer be uncommon charitable, she be only a fee-male arter all! On the other 'and, Sir Nevil were a very fine gentleman, all 'Quality' from 'ead to fut, and consequently never bothered 'is 'ead about none of 'is tenants no'ow and they respected him according, sich bein' their natur', and they thinks what was good enough for 'em when Squire were alive be good enough for 'em now 'e be dead an' gone. And seeing as 'e be dead — massacreed by a sanguinarious 'and, the folks 'ereabouts do think pore Squire's most owdacious murderer should be took — prompt, and 'ung

an' gibbeted at the four-wents yonder, be the criminalious party man or maid . . . 'specially as Squire's 'aant do ha' took to walking o' nights ——"

"Ha! walking!" exclaimed David, starting. "What do you mean?"

"I means Squire's appeariation, his spectator, sir. Old Joel do ha' seed it a flutterin' in the churchyard. Ah, an' William 's seed it, tu — leastways 'e says so."

"Have you seen it?" enquired David.

"Why, no, sir, I ain't, nor don't want . . . and nobody else ain't nor likely tu, seeing as nobody don't stir out arter dark now . . . except Old Jole, and bein' so aged 'e can't come to no 'arm, being a bit cracked-like on ghostes, d'ye see."

"Ay, to be sure — to be sure!" said David; and bidding Mr. Sprowls "good afternoon," he cantered on his way.

Birds twittered in tree and hedgerow, larks mounted heavenward upon the fragrant, sunny air, carolling blithely; and David, conscious of it all, felt a new joy of life wherein sun and bird-song, his own vigorous youth, the noble animal beneath him and his new clothes, each and all had their share. Thus as he rode, reins and whip in one gloved hand, chin well up, eyes wide and bright, buckled hat slightly a-cock, what wonder if David sang also, albeit softly and beneath his breath.

Presently he came where the road cut in between high green banks with wild flowers a-bloom in pretty riot. A touch of the spur and his mettled animal broke into a long, easy gallop; but suddenly, above the rhythmic beat of these galloping hoofs rose a piercing cry . . . a voice there was no mistaking:

"Help, sir — help!"

David reined up so suddenly that his horse reared . . . for he had glimpsed a pale face looking down at him from the hedge crowning the bank above.

"David!" cried the voice, "O David, is it you? Thank God!"

David was off his horse, up the bank and through the hedge, all in a moment, to behold a woman who crouched, panting, beneath the hedge, while before this woman, pale but defiant, stood Anticlea face to face with a burly, gipsy-seeming fellow, an evil-looking ruffian from dusty boots to battered hat, who now beholding David, flourished the cudgel he bore and broke into foul speech:

" . . . so stand off an' gimme my mort!" he ended.

"I don't know him!" panted the woman distressfully. "O, believe me, sir . . . 't is my bit o' money 'e be after . . . nigh 'ad it once, 'e did, but I got away from 'im and run till I dropped, then . . ."

"She screamed and I heard her," said Anticlea, "so I ran to help her, of course. But this man is so vile . . . a dangerous beast, and I——"

David leapt, wasting no words. . . . The man was powerful and his bludgeon heavy, but David was lithe and very quick . . . whip parried bludgeon and smote in turn full and true upon the crown of the weather-beaten hat; but, staggering, the man smote again, a wild blow that none the less sent David's new headgear flying and beat him to his knees, whereat the fellow roared in fierce exultation and, steadying himself, sprang in with murderous weapon aloft; but, rising swiftly, David eluded the stroke and, being in range, stopped the fellow's rush with a blow of unerring fist and staggered him anew with heavy whip. Cursing savagely, the man tripped and all but fell, dropping his bludgeon; whereupon David laughed, tossed away his whip and, dashing the blood from his eyes, went after his man with eager fists. But the fellow proved no novice at the game either, so for a time was fierce conflict, vicious and desperate, watched by two pale-faced women. Time and again the man endeavoured

to close, but David either eluded his dangerous rushes or smote him away with lightning blows, watching and waiting for the inevitable opening: suddenly it came, and out flashed David's right with all the weight of arm and shoulder and body behind it, and, throwing up his arms, the man fell and lay, kicking feebly. Leaping where lay his whip, David caught it up and, freeing the lash, turned upon his prostrate antagonist; but before he could strike Anticlea interposed:

"You have given him enough!" she cried.

"Not . . . not half . . . he deserves ——" panted David.

"Let him go . . . pray let him go . . . David — I beg!" she pleaded.

The cowed and battered wretch, glad to escape, hastened to get upon unsteady legs and made off without another word, or so much as staying to recover his bludgeon. Then, coming to his tumbled hat, David picked it up tenderly and viewed its dented brim and ruffled nap with such rueful eyes that Anticlea laughed, though a little shakily:

"Your new hat!" said she softly.

"Indeed," sighed David, "I seem somewhat unfortunate with hats!" Now glancing at Anticlea, he beheld in her eyes a light he had never noticed before, and heard in her voice a new gentleness.

"You are hurt!"

"No, indeed!" he answered, and wondered to see her trembling. "But the brute frightened you!"

"No, indeed!" she mimicked, but in the same soft new voice.

"But see how your hands shake!"

"That is not fear."

"And your cheeks so pale!"

"And your cheek bleeding!"

"'T is nothing to matter, child."

"Let me see! Sit you here — against this tree!"

"Pray do not trouble——"

"I insist!"

"Yes, mam!" And David sat obediently.

"Now turn your head. . . . Yes, it might be worse, your hat saved you! But your head is cut and must be bathed! There is a brook over yonder — come!"

So David rose, but chancing to espy the woman who yet crouched beneath the hedge, stood gazing down at her while she looked as earnestly up at him; a woman not old, whose face, once beautiful, was pinched and lined by hardship and sorrow.

"Surely we have met before . . . somewhere?" he asked in his gentle way.

"Yes, sir," she answered, "I mind you by your voice and way o' speech . . . we met one morning on London Bridge."

"Why, then, you are Nancy Martin, I guess? You are Ben Bowker's 'little Nan'?"

At this she bowed her head, hiding her face in work-roughened fingers.

"My poor Ben!" she sobbed, "My poor Ben!" Lifting her head suddenly she looked up through her tears, "But how do ye know o' this, sir?" she questioned eagerly. "Ha' ye seen my Ben — ha' ye seen him? D'you know him, sir?"

"He lent me two guineas!" answered David. "And I know he lives only to find you. He is away to London seeking you——"

"London!" she cried bitterly, "O, London! We must ha' passed each other on the road. . . . I only got to Lewes yesterday and heard he was here and came looking for him . . . and now . . . O — London!"

"Never grieve, child!" said David, touching her bowed shoulder kindly. "He shall be found, I promise you. So go back to your mother, be patient a little longer, for Happiness is coming to you at last, I guess!"

"O, God bless you, sir!" cried Nancy, drying her tears, "and you too, lady, you as took my part so brave . . . !" Here she caught Anticlea's hand and would have kissed it; but moved by that same new spirit of gentleness, Anticlea stooped and took the poor wanderer to her bosom.

"Do you . . . love . . . your Ben?" she questioned softly.

"All my days, lady — though I bean't worthy of him. . . . And I only lost him because . . . O lady, I be years older nor you and bitter suffering has learned me a many things! O, lady so young and beautiful . . . if you do love a man as be good an' true, never fear to show your love . . . for love as be real be above all things in this world! . . . And you, sir, you as can fight so fierce and be so gentle . . . don't be too late — don't be too long about telling!"

"Pray what must I tell?" enquired our dense David.

"Love, sir! The love as do be a-peeping out o' your eyes, a-singing in your heart."

David dropped his hat and, stooping to recover it, grew surprisingly red in the face.

"O, sir and mam!" said Nancy Martin, rising from her knees, "I be a woman has suffered and brought bitter sorrow on a good man! If only I had been a bit kinder to him years ago . . . if only I had listened to good 'stead of evil . . . if only Ben had spoke a bit sooner. . . . And the river nigh got me! So, sir an' madam, never fear love — 't is the best of all! For your kindness to a sorrowful, lonesome woman, God bless ye both and — bring ye to happiness!"

So Nancy Martin, worn by suffering but wise at last by sorrow, turned and went her solitary way, leaving David staring after her in blank amaze, and Anticlea to stare at him with the same new glory in her eyes.

"Now God bless my soul!" said David.

"And mine also!" sighed Anticlea.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Concerning the Pertinence of a Brook

Now, when Nancy Martin had trudged out of sight, Anticlea reached David her hand.

"Come," said she, "come to the brook and have your hurt bathed!"

"But pray believe me, mam," he answered, finding himself strangely diffident, "my head is ——"

"Sir," said she, "once on a time you splashed me with water — outrageously, and now it is my turn. Come!"

"But . . . the horse?"

"Back to Loring, to be sure!" she nodded. "You were riding 'The Marquis', and he never stands . . . he is back in his stable long ago — at least he is gone, as you may see for yourself." And, indeed, peering down into the road, David perceived the animal was utterly vanished; wherefore he turned with Anticlea, and side by side they came where a merry brook leaped and laughed and chuckled amid mossy stones. Here, side by side, they knelt together while she tended the cut above his ear with hands he thought surprisingly soft and gentle; she laughing, a little unsteadily, when he complained of water down his neck.

And side by side, her ministrations done, they sat beside this blithesome rill, listening to its pretty babble and therefore saying very little themselves, she sitting chin on hand gazing down at these sparkling waters, and he turning now and then to steal a glance at her; noting, as he had never done ere this, all those many attributes which together made her individual: the

dark, low-arched brows; the long-lashed eyes; the nose that, being neither arched nor straight, was exactly right; the vivid, full-lipped mouth; the resolute chin; the full, round throat; the graceful pose of rounded limbs and shapely body; and found in each an ever-growing joy. And be sure Anticlea contrived to see much beside the rippling brook; as, for instance:

The gentle eyes so much at odds with his darkly aquiline features; the dark, thick-curling hair; the bold, high carriage of his head; the lithe and slender form so much stronger than it seemed; the slim, long-fingered hands; all this she viewed frequently, yet whenever he chanced to look up her gaze was upon the brook, of course . . . this brook that gurgled and whispered and chuckled in manner so extremely familiar and knowing, and which, finding them both thus speechless, seemed to gurgle and whisper and chuckle louder than ever, while David watched Anticlea thus, furtively, and she, him.

At last, wishful to hear his voice whose soft drawl and quaint diction were so peculiarly characteristic of him and so new in her experience, she spoke that he might speak:

"So you knew that poor woman?"

"I met her once, lady." And forthwith he recounted the incident. "And indeed 'twas noble of you to protect her!" he ended. "It was vastly brave and very like you to defy that evil ruffian, lady."

"But it was grand of you to knock him down . . . Mr. Hedges!"

"Please don't address me . . . so!" he pleaded.

"Then pray don't call me 'lady'!" she admonished.

"Very well, mam."

"Nor 'mam'!"

"You called me 'David' a while ago," he suggested.

"I know I did!" said Anticlea, and frowned at the brook, whereupon David frowned at it also; and thus

was silence again, though, to be sure, the stream prattled more knowingly than ever.

"Poor Nancy Martin!" said David suddenly. "She . . . talked a little wildly . . . don't you think?"

"About — what?"

Here David hesitated and the brook chuckled.

"Love!" said he, with an effort.

"I remember," said Anticlea softly.

"Do you think she . . . was right?" he enquired a little anxiously.

"Well . . . it all depends!" she answered.

"Yes . . . I suppose it does!" he admitted somewhat ruefully.

And here the brook laughed outright.

"The Duchess," said David at last. "Her Grace is surely a wonderful lady ——"

"Yes," nodded Anticlea, "she threw her wig at me this morning!"

"Wig?" repeated David, in shocked amazement. "How . . . how undignified!"

"Exactly what I told her."

"But why did she commit such a ——"

"Because I refused to marry a marquis."

"Ha!" exclaimed David, scowling fiercely. "Very right of you — extremely right and proper!"

"Her wig flew out of her reach on the top of a book-case, so I got it down for her, the small, hateful wretch, and then ——"

"Well?"

"I had to kiss her."

"Who?"

"The 'hateful wretch,' of course!"

"Extraordinary!" murmured our perplexed David. "Pray why were you forced to kiss her?"

"Just because, though a wretch, she looked such a small, dear thing without her great wig . . . her own hair is all silky curls snowy white. . . . So I kissed

her, and out of her eyes — they are beautiful eyes — rolled two big tears! Then she called me a baggage and a minx, and other things, and put on her wig anyhow and kissed me back — quite unexpectedly. . . . Indeed, she is making it very hard for me to detest her properly!"

"But why . . . why must you detest her?"

"Because she expects implicit obedience and, what is much worse, demands it!"

"But one must obey one's elders, child ——"

"O, and must one, sir! Lord, but you talk like a bearded ancestor or a child's copy-book!"

Here David flushed, folded his arms and scowled down haughtily at the brook. . . . And after some while Anticlea spoke again in accents softer, sweeter than ever:

"You see, David, my detestable wretch is taking me to London next week ——"

"London?" exclaimed David, his haughtiness forgotten all in a moment. "What in the world for? Do you wish to go?"

"I did!" she murmured.

"Ay, but . . . do you?"

"She will take me all the same!"

"Why, then," said David, unfolding his arms, "I must kiss you to-day . . . now!"

"Must you?" murmured Anticlea, gazing down into the brook.

"Yes!" he answered. "If . . . if you . . . don't mind?" he ended, becoming suddenly diffident.

"What would that matter?" she questioned softly.

"Nothing at all!" he answered. "For truly, Anticlea, you see . . . I have just been yearning to kiss you . . . ever since we met!"

"Then, David . . . why don't you?"

Almost as she spoke he had her in his arms; and lying thus above his heart she looked up at him with

the glory in her eyes and spoke in that new voice so strangely soft and caressing:

"But O, David . . . David — my red hair?"

"Yes?" said he, and kissed it.

"But you told me you did n't like red hair."

"I don't," said he, "I love it!"

"And me too, David . . . all of me?"

"Yes!" he answered, "Yes — all of you."

"But you never seemed to care for me."

"I did n't know I did — until to-day."

"And now, David?"

"Now," said he, and would have kissed her, but she held him away.

"David?" she questioned, "Dear? . . . What did you do with my dagger?"

Now, at this he started and his arms relaxed their hold a little.

"I hid it!" he answered.

"Why did you hide it? . . . And don't turn your head away or loose me just yet, David, because . . . I know the reason! You thought . . . ah, no — you think 't was I killed ——"

"Hush!" he whispered, "O, hush!"

"But you do, David, you do!"

"Then tell me, O Anticlea . . . tell me you did n't!" he pleaded, holding her closer than ever. "Look into my eyes, dear love, and tell me you did n't ——"

"O David!" she sighed. "Surely 't is strangely wonderful that you can look at a murderess with love in your eyes, and that I can lie in the arms of a murderer and joy to be there. For, David, if you suspected me . . . as you did . . . I suspected you ——"

"Why, then," said David, "O, thank God — you mean . . ."

"That I love you, David, for loving me in spite of your suspicions. O, indeed, for this I am your very

grateful woman and shall be — all my days! Hush — ask me no questions . . . ! But, David dear, although I shall never lie so in your arms again until you shall be as sure of me as I am of you, yet, because you loved me in spite of all . . . why, David — kiss me!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Telleth how David Heard the Ghost

Through countless ages this old sun of ours has been rising and setting in more or less splendour every day of the year; this evening it set as usual and made but a very ordinary business of it. And yet David, leaning upon the old stile where he had just parted from Anticlea, stood gazing in rapt and silent awe upon the western sky, for he knew within himself that never had there been so glorious a sunset nor ever could be — for him, at least.

And then, this stile! A warped and weather-beaten monstrosity of a stile it was in very fact, and yet in his eyes a very holy thing, since there her foot had been, here her hand had rested, this knotted timber had been blessed by the touch of her garments! . . . And holy things are to be revered accordingly!

Therefore David removed his hat and stooped . . . to start suddenly erect at sound of a querulous, high-pitched voice:

"'S'matter wi' th' owd stoile, young maaster, wot be 'ee a-smellin' of it fur? Man an bye I 've clumb that theer stoile for six-an'-sixty year odd, but never troied a-smellin' of 'e, an' never knawed nobody as never did! . . . Hey, boide a bit, young sir, doan't 'ee run away an' oi'll tell 'ee summat as'll mak' y'r 'air stand up, chill y'r blood an' freeze y'r marrer — leastways, if it doan't it oughter!"

Saying which, Old Joel hobbled forward, alternately flourishing his stick and touching his hat as he came.

"How are you, Mr. Bybrook?"

"Sproy Oi be, sproy as a colt an' 'appy as a lark an' ready for me supper! I be that 'ungry my innards is a-playin' 'The British Grenadiers' drums an' arl—you can 'ear 'em if you 'ark. An' yonder be my son, Young Jole!" and he pointed wavering stick towards a tall, grey-headed man, with a mattock on his shoulder, who was approaching in hoarse confabulation with the red-whiskered William.

"Come 'ere, Young Jole, come 'ere, me bye!" piped the Patriarch, as they drew near. "This be my friend —the noo bailie—say 'ow do to the gen'elman."

Obedient to which behest the grey-haired 'Young' Joel touched earthy finger to grizzled eyebrow and muttered hoarsely:

"Evenin', sir!"

"Ecod, sir," quoth the red-whiskered William, grinning sheepishly, "that was a thunderin' 'ard crack as you ketched me las' wik' along theer in the 'Oss'!"

"I hope I didn't hurt you too much," said David.

"Why, ye see, sir," grinned William, "my 'ead be powerful 'ard-loike——"

"No, thick!" nodded the Patriarch. "Ah, the thickest 'ead in Sussex, William! And us doan't want 'ee, so 'old y'r tongue an' get 'long 'ome——"

"But, Gaffer——"

"And doan't 'ee go fur to tell the young gen'elman naun o' y'r lies about seein' ghostes, neether!"

"Lord, Gaffer, I ain't said a word yet, 'ave I?"

"Nobody won't never believe ye if ye do, William, so 'old y'r tongue. You ain't seed no ghostes an' never will, you ain't got the gift——"

"But I did, Gaffer! I seed Squire's ghost plain as plain, I did—ah, strike me stiff if I didn't. I seen Squire's ghost limpin' in the churchyard las' night—limpin' on 'is left leg, Gaffer, plain as——"

"T were 'is roight leg, Oi tell 'ee!"

"'T were 'is left, Gaffer! I seen 'un so plain as ——"

"You never seed nothin' at arl, William ——"

"I seen it come a-limpin' round the corner by Jane Birche's store — on 'is left leg, Gaffer ——"

"What loike was it — tell me that!" snarled the Patriarch.

"Why, like a gobling, fur sure, Gaffer, arl crooked an' bowed-like an' never no sound — ah, an' limped very fast it did — on its left leg ——"

"'T were the roight leg, Oi tell 'ee!"

"Left, Gaffer!"

"O William!" cried the Patriarch, "ef Oi did n't want my teeth for better stuff I 'd boite 'ee. . . . Tak' 'im away, Young Jole, tak' 'im away afore I ketch 'im one in the whiskers wi' my ol' bat 'ere!" And the old man flourished his stick belligerently.

Hereupon the rubicund William was led away, protesting, by the stolid but obedient "Young Joel," what time the indignant Patriarch shook stick in tremulous fist and vituperated until he choked.

"Oi 'opes as 'ee . . . gets bit . . . by a' adder!" he gasped. "Doan't 'ee go fur to believe 'im, young man, 'e ain't never seed no ghostesses an' could n't never nowise an' no'ow!"

"But you did, Mr. Bybrook?"

"Ay, fur sure, fur sure!" cried the old man eagerly, "sarten-sure-indeed I did! Yonder it were agin' the church porch . . . a-fletterin' an' a-flutterin' — 'over-ing-loike, and away it went among they tombses and never no sound!"

"And you are sure that it . . . limped?"

"Ay, sarten sure Oi be. 'T were its limp as told me wot it were. 'Be that you, Squoire?' says I bold as bold, 'Be that you, Squoire? Wun't they let 'ee rest an' boide comfortable in y'r grave, Squoire?' Oi says. 'Are ye a-seekin' y'r murderer, Squoire?' says Oi.

An' at that, young man, it seemed to look at me an' give a sort o' moan an' vanished itself away!"

"And then what did you do?"

"Went 'long 'ome to bed. . . . Oi tell 'ee pore Squoire's ghost 'll go a-fletterin' an' flutterin' weevil-some-like until 'is murderer's found an' 'ung — Oi knows!"

"Strange!" mused David.

"Ah!" nodded the old man. "But there be strange goin's-on in lonely churchyards of a noight, 'specially where lays a murdered man!"

"And you saw it — last night, you say?"

"Ah! And I'll see it again. Ghostesses is meat an' drink an' 'bacca to Oi. . . . An' talkin' o' 'bacca, if there be ghostesses there be angels tu, Oi reckon! Brings me 'bacca, she du, every wik', an' bottles o' stuff for me pore old j'ints."

"Who does?"

"Why, 'er, fur sure! Ef ye want to see — go an' look i' the church!"

"What — now?"

"Ah, now!"

"Whom do you mean?"

"I mean — 'er! She be theer now, go an' look!"

So David rose, and following a path that led between green mounds and mossy headstones worn by long years, came to the church and softly opened massive door whose solid oak and stout iron had, like enough, withstood vengeful steel ere now, and, stepping into the ancient building, stood suddenly still, for the place seemed full of a small, soft singing wonderfully sweet.

She was kneeling in that remote corner where, worn by centuries of years, the battered stone effigy of the first Sir David in his ring-mail, Knight of the Cross and founder of the church, marked the final resting-place of his descendants — Humphreys, Nevils and Davids.

Suddenly the singing ended and, as if aware of his entrance, she glanced up.

"Mistress Belinda!" said David, and went towards her.

"Ah, is it you, sir?" she smiled, rising from her knees and giving him her hand.

"I fear I disturbed you?"

"Nay, I had finished, sir. . . . I come here frequently at evening to sing to him. . . . and though I sing so very softly, yet he, being dead, can hear me, of course, since the dead are perfected. But O Mr. David, I fear he is a very lonely soul — indeed, I know he is . . . and full of grief for the past . . . the wasted opportunities . . . the evil he did — the good he might have done. . . . My poor Nevil! O, the Past, for ever gone! The evil that lives on after the hand that wrought it is stilled! Is there any pain so sharp as remorse in life? Then how much sharper and more bitter in death! O poor, solitary Nevil! . . . And so it is he cannot rest of a night, and so it is I come here to sing to him, hoping it may comfort him a little."

"You knew him well, lady?"

"So well that beneath the evil I am sure lay the good — which can never die, sir — the good that lived on in him despite hereditary evil."

"Hereditary, lady?"

"Alas, Mr. David, there have been many evil Lorings! It was to win pardon for past deadly sin that the first Sir David fought and suffered in King Richard's Crusade, and since then the old evil has sometimes reared its wicked head. . . . Poor Nevil! But kindly Death has set him free at last . . . free to sin no more! Death which is so like to sleep, Death that is the great deliverer. . . . But, being dead, he knows now and grieves for past evil, and can find no rest, even now, poor lonely soul!"

"But, lady, if — if he is dead . . . ?" stammered David.

"His body lies beneath our feet, sir," she answered, "but only his body. Who dare say where his spirit is? Who can tell what — hush!" Uttering the word she raised one slim hand suddenly and stood as if listening, her gentle gaze bent upon the timeworn stone at her feet, whereon David could read the new-graven inscription:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
SIR NEVIL LORING
Aged 52.
Thirteenth baronet.

The dusk had deepened about them, filling the ancient church with shadows that crept stealthily, the air seemed colder.

"Mrs. Belinda," said David, at last, in hushed voice, "do you, then — can you believe that the dead may — come back ——?"

"Listen!" she breathed, and he felt her hand upon his, warm and soft and steady, and upon her lips a smile ineffably tender, "Listen!" she whispered.

A timber creaked in the ancient roof, the age-old walls seemed full of mysterious rustlings; and then, despite vigorous youth, David's blood chilled, as above these sounds rose another . . . a soft whisper, a vague stirring that grew to a sound dreadfully familiar which seemed to steal upon the shadows and was gone . . . the soft fall of limping feet.

Instinctively David shrank until, being stayed by the massive pillar behind him, he leaned there staring towards that gravestone with its new-cut lettering, incapable alike of coherent speech or thought until roused by Mrs. Belinda's soft voice:

"You heard it?" she whispered, clasping her hands and turning eyes heavenward. "You heard it, Mr. David? This is why I steal here of an evening to sing to him! . . . O Nevil — my poor Nevil!"

For a while David remained motionless where he stood gazing fixedly before him; when at last he glanced around he found himself alone. Then very deliberately he approached the great stone which covered the Loring tomb and stood gazing down at the last, and newest, brief and non-commital epitaph.

From this examination he was suddenly aroused by a soft tapping and, glancing towards a certain leaded window, espied a dim face peering in at him, a face surmounted by a wide-brimmed hat. Even as he stared, this face vanished; thereafter he was aware of heavy footsteps and Mr. Shrig came towards him through the deepening gloom.

"How goes it, pal?" he enquired, his hearty tones echoing strangely from roof and walls. "You looks a bit rum — eh, vot is it?"

"I wish," answered David, his voice low and troubled, "I wish I knew . . . for, by Heaven, Jasper, I am either mad or . . . a dead man walks!"

Mr. Shrig's eyes grew suddenly round, his placid brow showed wrinkled and, stepping nearer, he peered into David's face.

"Eh — you too, pal?" he enquired. "D'ye mean as you've seen this here ghost as they tell on — you?"

"I heard it, Jasper!"

"Heard it?" repeated Mr. Shrig, in tone suddenly hushed. "Vot — here, pal? What like vas it?"

"Footsteps, Jasper, that went with a limp!"

"Aha!" sighed Mr. Shrig, and stood gazing up at the roof, his lips pursed in their soundless whistle.

"You . . . believe me, Jasper?"

"Ay, I do, pal, I do — every vord! You've done me a power o' good!"

"How have I done you good?"

"To-night I scratches out another on 'em . . . Five is Four, pal!"

"What — whom do you mean?"

"Ghosts is a bit out o' my line, pal, but whenever I 'appens acrost 'em perfessionally I acts according."

"How, Jasper?"

"Pal, I've never met a ghost yet as could wanish itself avay once I got my daddles or, as you might say, fambles on it . . . And now come along o' me! When ghosts is a-flitting there's naught so 'eartening as a pot of 'old' . . . so — come along o' Jarsper!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

Mr. Shrig Makes a Further Discovery

Mr. Shrig, seated with David in the rustic arbour of "The Rearing Horse" Inn, set down his half-emptied tankard and sighed.

"'T is a pore 'eart as never rej'ices, pal!" quoth he. "Here 's you made bailiff to your werry own estates!"

"True, Jasper! But why should you rejoice?"

"Vell . . . this 'ere ghost, pal!"

"Ay, the spectre that limps . . . What do you think of it, Jasper?"

"A precious lot!" answered Mr. Shrig, shaking his head. "Here 's me, now, an' others o' my lads been a-seekin' an' a-searchin' 'eavens 'ard for two birds as is flew avay——"

"Meaning Bowker and Yaxley, Jasper?"

"The werry same, pal."

"Have you captured them?"

"Ay, I 'ave, pal — leastvays vun on 'em!"

"What, have you taken Yaxley — have you found him at last?"

"Not yet, pal — t'other 'un."

"Bowker?" exclaimed David anxiously. "Have you taken poor Ben Bowker?"

"Ay, I got 'im, pal, safe an' sound — under lock an' key — at Lewes!"

"But he is no murderer!"

"No more 'e ain't, pal, accordin' to my de-ductions, but then, again — 'e may be, and vot 's more, 'e knows summat — same as you knows summat."

"Then why not lock me up also?"

"Because I knows vhere I can clap a daddle on ye, pal, vhenever needful——"

"O indeed, Jasper?"

"Ah! I'll find you 'enceforth not a thousand mile from Number Two—us knows 'oo!" Here beholding David's indignant look, Mr. Shrig raised his tankard: "Long life, 'ealth and 'appiness, pal!" quoth he, and drank copiously.

"And pray," enquired David, a little haughtily, "pray what of the man Yaxley?"

"Pal," said Mr. Shrig, pausing to blow into his tankard, "if I has any luck, I'm 'oping to show 'im to ye nicely tarred agin' the veather an' ironed agin'. Body-snatchers, a-danglin' werry secure on a gibbet afore the moon changes!"

"Ha!" exclaimed David, starting. "So he is the murderer, then? You are sure at last?"

"Ay, sartin sure as he's *a* murderer, pal . . . Now, talkin' o'——"

"*A* murderer, Jasper? Surely you mean *the* murderer?"

"*A* or *the*, pal—vot's the odds? An' talkin' o'——"

"Do you mean that you know him for Sir Nevil Loring's murderer?"

"I knows 'im for a true Capital Cove, pal—ah, knowed it I did the moment I clapped my ogles—or as you might say peepers on 'im, I did! So there y'are! An' now, talkin' o' this here ghost——"

"But," David demurred, "you have not answered my—— What on earth is that?" he broke off, for somewhere adjacent was a faint scratching.

"That?" answered Mr. Shrig, placidly cocking an ear. "It sounds like a cat, but it ain't . . . it might be a dog but, likevise again, it ain't! 'T is only Dan'l! Come forrard, lad!" he called softly, whereupon a small, furtive shape stole into view, a slim, meek-

looking person whose mild features were framed in hay-like whiskers.

"This here 's Dan'l, pal!" said Mr. Shrig. "An' though you don't know Dan'l, Dan'l knows you — eh, Dan'l?"

"Ah!" murmured the furtive Dan'l, touching nondescript headgear and blinking, meekly apologetic.

"Wot Dan'l don't know — ain't!" said Mr. Shrig. "As sharp as a packet o' needles and wi' more o' the Old Adam about 'im than folks might think! That 's Dan'l, pal! 'Ow goes it, Dan'l?"

"All serene, Jarsper, 'e 's a-comin' along now."

"Werry good, Dan'l. Ha' ye got the cotton?"

"Ay, Jarsper."

"Black an' vhite an' plenty on it?"

"Here, Jarsper."

"Then give it over, and lay low, Dan'l, and be ready."

"Right-o, Jarsper."

"Perhaps I had better retire?" said David as the stealthy Dan'l vanished; but when he would have risen Mr. Shrig's heavy hand stayed him.

"Sit where y'are, pal, keep in the shadder — you won't be seen, and if y'are it won't matter none . . . only keep still. Are ye armed?"

"No."

"That 's a blessing!"

"Why do you ask?"

"Hist!" said Mr. Shrig, and rose, his burly form blocking the arbour's narrow entrance; and David heard the sound of feet striding rapidly towards them along the garden-path nearer and nearer until they stopped suddenly; then:

"Good evenin', sir!" said Mr. Shrig.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded the newcomer, whose carefully modulated voice and imperious tone David instantly recognised.

"Why are you here, Mr. Maulyveery, sir?" enquired Mr. Shrig placidly.

"You sent for me——"

"Ay, but you did n't vant to come, sir, and nobody forced ye to come, sir, so vhy did ye come, sir?"

"A man brought me your note!"

"Vherein I mentioned the name of a certain young fe-male party as you——"

"Yes — yes!" exclaimed Mr. Maulverer harshly, "Well, I am here! What do you want?"

"First to ax you vot you vas a-doing of in Sir N.'s room on the night o' the murder?"

"Who says I was there?"

"Your boots, sir — a smear o' ink on the sole! Vot brought you along o' the corp', Mr. Maulyveery, sir?"

"Suppose I refuse to answer?"

"You 'll make it all the vorse for the fe-male as I mentioned in my message."

Here Mr. Maulverer uttered a sound very like a groan.

"I . . . I have nothing to tell you . . . nothing!" said he.

"Then, sir, I adwise you to tell it and ha' done . . . for the sake of . . . let 's say — another!"

"How? . . . What do you suggest?"

"Come, come — vot brought you there? Tell me all you know!"

For a space Mr. Maulverer was silent — when at last he spoke his voice was imperious no longer:

"I had retired for the night . . . but . . . before I could undress I fancied he — Sir Nevil — called me. So I went down and found him — dead."

"And so the candles was alight, then, sir?"

"Yes!"

"What o'clock was it?"

"I don't know . . . I did n't notice! Past midnight, I fancy."

"And 'aving deskivered the dead body — vot did ye do then?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, eh?"

"No! . . . I went back to my room."

"And you see nobody, sir, comin' or goin'?"

"No."

"And heer'd nothin' — a footstep, say, a rustle?"

"No . . . no!"

"Quite sure o' that, sir?"

"I . . . yes — quite sure, I tell you."

"An' you left the candles burnin', sir?"

"Yes . . . no!"

"Take your ch'ice, sir."

"No. I extinguished them."

"An' took yourself off to bed, sir, leaving the corp' in the dark?"

"I returned to my room."

"Leavin' the cadaver to be found in the mornin'. P'raps you 'll tell me why, sir?"

"Because I judged it best."

"An' why did n't you alarm the 'ouse, sir?"

"For a . . . sufficient reason."

"What reason, sir?"

"I refuse to say."

"Do ye, sir?"

"I do."

"Won't tell me — eh, sir?"

"No — no!"

"Ha!" sighed Mr. Shrig softly. "Now I fancy as I can tell ye your reason — shall I try, sir?"

"As you will."

"Werry good, sir. First, then, you 're in love vith a certain young fe-male party — ain't you? . . . Steady, sir! Yes, I see y'are and conseqvently I knows your reason — and here it is in three vords ——" Once more came that sound so like a groan, but louder

now and with the sudden, quick scrape of a foot . . . Then, all at once, Mr. Shrig was gone from the doorway, and, peering through the dusk, David saw a blur of twisting, writhing forms, heard fierce-drawn breaths, shuffling feet with other sounds of strife, and leaping forth of the arbour, saw Mr. Maulverer struggling in the grasp of two arms that pinioned him from behind, while Mr. Shrig gripped that hand which held the swift-drawn pistol.

"Murder me . . . would ye? 'Old fast, Dan'l! . . . Now, sir, gimme your barker!" panted Mr. Shrig, and with a surprising dexterity possessed himself of the deadly weapon. "That's better!" quoth he. "All right, Dan'l, leave the gen'leman go!"

Mr. Maulverer, pale and dishevelled, glanced helplessly around with a despairing motion of hard-wrung hands, yet uttered no word.

"Sir," said Mr. Shrig, pocketing the pistol, "you 'ave commit a grave offence agin' my person an' the law; any ordinary officer vould go for to arrest ye. But, then, I ain't a' ordinary officer, I'm Shrig o' Bow Street, a Bashaw o' the Pigs . . . an' Capital Coves is my meat—not your sort, so, Mr. Maulyveery, sir, you can go . . . Only mark an' 'eed this, sir . . . You thinks as you knows the party as murdered Sir Nevil Loring, Barrynet, and Mr. 'Edges 'e thinks 'e knows, but I—*do* know . . . leastways if I don't, nobody do. An' mind this, sir, them as murders 'angs, 'igh degree or low, male or fe-male——"

Mr. Maulverer threw out his hands with a sudden wild gesture and, uttering a hoarse, inarticulate sound, turned and hurried away into the shadows.

"Arter 'im, Dan'l!" said Mr. Shrig softly and, seating himself again in the arbour, beckoned David beside him.

CHAPTER XL

Concerning Mr. Shrig, his Methods

"An 'ighly inter-esting young gen'leman, pal! Mr. Maulyveery, or Number Three, is a werry promising case!"

"On the contrary," said David indignantly, "he is a man — and indeed more human than I supposed! . . . You suggested he was in love with someone — whom did you mean?"

"'E knows, pal . . . and it vorked."

"O despicable!" exclaimed David. "To threaten a man through his affections! To terrorise him by insinuations against one he loves! Such methods might surely drive any man desperate."

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, "and pal, Number Three — Mr. M. — is a-goin' to be drove more desp'rit afore I'm done. For I'm a Agent o' the Law wi' methods different from most, d'ye see . . . methods o' my own ——"

"Well, such methods seem unjust and cruel to me!" said David. "And you have n't answered my question ——"

"No, pal! My dooty is to ax questions, not to answer 'em. And as to my methods — look'ee! Some folks is usefullest to a' enquiring cove like me only when drove desp'rit and others only when afraid, some you must treat crool and some you must treat kind to come at vot you vant. Now, Mr. M. — Number Three — ain't afeard o' nobody nor nothin' . . . except — vell, I know vot an' acts accordin' . . . an'

one result is Windictiveness in the shape of a silver-mounted popper!" Here from capacious pocket Mr. Shrig drew a small pistol which David recognised, even in the half-light, as fellow to that which he had taken from Sir Nevil Loring. "An' t'other result I shall know as soon as Dan'l comes back. Meantime I scratches Number Three off my list o' possibles."

"What?" exclaimed David, peering into Mr. Shrig's placid face, "you think he is innocent . . . ?"

"Ah! As innercent as yourself, pal. The six is now three!"

"And who — who . . . which are these three?"

"I'll tell ye, pal — if you'll v'isper and tell your pal Jarsper vot you done wi' that theer silver-'andled stilletter . . . Come, vot d'ye say?"

"No!"

"No!" repeated Mr. Shrig, "Hum! Sometimes I'm a bit saprised as Jarsper is your pal, pal. Seein' as you've done so much to hinder and 'amper pore Jarsper! Seein' 'ow you've thieved pore Jarsper's cloos, first the knife an' then the 'air — the long, red 'air as come off'n the lovely 'ead — or as you might say tibby — O, you-know-'oo, an' both con-cloosive ewidence agin' you-know-'oo ——"

"Which I deny!" cried David passionately, "I say they are not conclusive . . . I tell you ——"

"Ah — but vot do you think?" demanded Mr. Shrig, suddenly grim. "You can say vot you like, an' tell vot you like, an' deny all you like, but — vot do you think? That's the qvestion! What do ye think an' — fear?"

Here David shrank back into dark corner and was silent; whereupon Mr. Shrig answered for him:

"What you think is a-troublin' you now, an' did trouble you to that degree as you took and made off wi' that knife an' that 'air! An' because vhy? Because by so doin' you 'oped to throw pore Jarsper off

the scent — 'stead o' vich, you throwed him on! I'll 'ave these daddles o' mine on the guilty party sooner than you may expect, for if my methods is cruel an' unjust they generally succeeds . . . And the law is the law, dooty is dooty, an' them as murders 'angs, be they ——"

"Stop!" cried David, springing to his feet; and, with both hands upon his companion's broad shoulders, leaned to peer into his impassive face. "I believe this was no murder, Jasper!" said he, "I do believe this was the most justifiable homicide that an evil man ever brought upon himself. I believe that whoever struck that fatal blow — killed Sir Nevil in ——"

"The werry act o' writing, pal! You'll mind 'is fingers was stained wi' ink, and the pen broke . . . hist! Somebody's a-coming!" Sure enough upon the heavy air was a sound of running feet that yet trod softly, and a small figure stole into view.

"How goes it, Dan'l?"

"All's bowmon, pal!" panted the meek Dan'l, "'E's there!"

"Went in, did 'e?"

"Ay, Jarsper."

"An' then you vaited — eh?"

"Fi' minutes, Jarsper. Then in I goes and finds 'e 'd wanished away like 'e did afore."

"And the ghost-traps, Dan'l?"

"The li'l cupboard under the stair, Jarsper."

"The cupboard, eh! Burn me if I'd ever ha' suspected that! Ha' you got the lanthorn?"

"'Ere, Jarsper."

"Good lad!" quoth Mr. Shrig, rising to take the article in question. "And now, pal David," said he, "if you 'ave a mind to a bit o' ghost-'unting — say the vord!"

"Yes!" answered David, and stepped out from the arbour.

"Spoke like a bang-up sportsman, pal. . . . As for you, Dan'l, get ye to bed, us 'll 'ave a busy day tomorrow; ah, an' a wakeful night, like as not. So off wi' you, Dan'l. . . . An' now, pal David, since you ain't afeared o' ghosts — step along o' Jarsper."

CHAPTER XLI

Tells How Mr. Shrig Went Ghost-hunting

Some ten minutes' walk beyond the village, Mr. Shrig turned sharp to the right down a very narrow, deeply rutted lane until, stopping before a broken gate that hung askew, he pointed to a small and desolate cottage, its dreariness rendered more apparent by a rising moon.

"Bein' stooard to your werry own estates you 've been here afore, pal, maybe?"

"No," answered David, wondering, "what place is this?"

"Thomas Yaxley's cottage, pal, and them trees as you spies beyond is Loring Vood. . . . An' talkin' o' vood, 'ere's a bit as I've found werry 'andy now an' then. Ye see, us may run foul o' Windictiveness in some shape or other, and you'll find this 'ere 'crab' o' mine play werry pretty at close quarters!" Saying which, Mr. Shrig handed David his famous knobbed stick and, opening the rickety gate, strode up the neglected path, threw open the cottage door and entered, all in a moment. For a while he stood in the dim interior utterly still, as if listening intently, then, bidding David enter, took out flint and steel and set about lighting the lanthorn, whose beam showed them a small, untidy chamber that bore a grim look of having been suddenly deserted; the muddy boots thrown carelessly into a corner, the litter of unwashed platters upon ramshackle table, the wizened-faced clock in the corner, which, being stopped, seemed to David as if holding its breath in horrified expectancy.

Mr. Shrig threw the beam of his lanthorn where, in one corner, was a narrow stair beneath which a small door gaped upon a shallow cupboard; from this he turned to examine the stair itself across which a fine cotton was stretched, lastly the shuttered and curtainless window across which another cotton ran.

"Ghost-trap, pal," said he, whispering, "I never knowed a ghost yet as vas proof agin' cotton!" So saying he approached the cupboard, surveying it with much apparent interest, then from capacious pocket he drew a short though heavy brass-mounted pistol and therewith began very gently to tap at the sides and back of this cupboard.

"'Oller!" he nodded, "You 'ear that . . . an' that? 'Oller as a drum, pal!"

"A secret door?" enquired David, stepping nearer.

"Eggsackly!" nodded Mr. Shrig complacently. "I'll find the trick of it in a bit — or break it down. . . . Ah!" The back of the cupboard swung suddenly into gloom, leaving a narrow aperture that framed a black void. Mr. Shrig's pistol clicked sharply as he cocked it; then, following whither he led, David found himself in a narrow passage, damp and noisome.

Slowly and cautiously Mr. Shrig advanced until they came where the passage made a sharp turn, and here, in the angle, frowned a narrow door, its massive timbers reinforced by stout though rusty iron. Mr. Shrig surveyed this grim obstruction placidly and, having tried it, shook his head:

"An' there y'are, pal!" quoth he, "A barrel o' gunpowder might open it." So saying, he turned and led the way along the passage with the same elaborate caution. As they advanced the air grew the more fetid until at last Mr. Shrig paused.

"Smell anything, pal?" he enquired.

"Could anyone help smelling it?" answered David. "Faugh!"

"It ain't eggsackly roses," said Mr. Shrig, sniffing. "No, nor yet lilies o' the walley . . . an' yet — hum! Don't it remind you o' summat?"

"Corruption!" replied David.

"Werry true, pal! . . . Hist! D'ye hear anything?"

Borne to them on the noxious air was a faint whisper of sound, vague and indistinct.

"D'ye hear it, pal?"

"What is it, Jasper?"

"Look at the roof!"

Glancing up, David saw the masonry above them all slimily a-gleam in the uncertain light.

"Pah!" he exclaimed in shrinking disgust, "Let us go forward or back again."

"Forrard it is, pal!"

Little by little the vague sounds grew more distinct until David knew these for the monotonous drip, drip of water.

"Jasper, where in the world are we?"

"Us 'll know soon, pal . . . and Caution says 'Go easy!' Aha!" They had reached another sharp bend or corner, and Mr. Shrig, halting suddenly, raised the lanthorn to peer towards a black void that opened before them, a dark abyss whence, it seemed, breathed this cold and fetid air.

"Tread cautious!" said Mr. Shrig, as with the lanthorn before him he advanced until, peering over his shoulder, David saw they stood close upon this gloomy abyss beyond which rose a wall of curved masonry whose slimy stones were splotched, here and there, with huge, pallid fungoid growths; while the evil place echoed and re-echoed with the drip-drip of falling water far below.

"Pal," said Mr. Shrig, his voice booming strangely in the void, "pal David, can ye guess where we are — now?" And in that moment David knew, and felt

again that sense of creeping horror, that indefinable dread that mocked his reason.

"Yes!" he answered, "Yes, the well — let us go, Jasper."

Mr. Shrig turned suddenly and looked at him, and so for a moment they stared at each other, eye to eye.

"Pal David," said he, "if a man vas to be dropped down yonder, that man would wanish and stay wanished till the crack o' doom. . . . But, Davy man, I'm a-goin' to take a peep all the same!"

As he spoke, Mr. Shrig pocketed his pistol, crept cautiously to the brink of the abyss and, holding the lanthorn far out over the void, peered up and down, to right, to left, and uttered a sudden exclamation, his voice booming awfully in the chasm.

"Burn my innards!" he ejaculated. Then, setting the lanthorn against slimy wall, he caught David by the arm: "Pal," said he, his usual placidity quite gone, "you're pretty strong. . . . O pal — reach up under my coat-tails and ketch 'old o' my belt . . . ketch 'old, I tell ye — so! Now 'old on 'eavens 'ard — don't leggo or your pal Jarsper 'll be a goner! . . . Are ye ready ——?"

"But what — what . . . why . . . what are you going to do?" stammered David.

"I'm a-going to trust my life t'you, pal. . . . I'm a-going to reach out over yon devil's pit . . . my right arm round the angle o' the vall, pal, and you 're a-goin' to brace yourself agin' my weight! Now . . . are ye ready? Then — easy does it!"

So saying, and before David might prevent, Mr. Shrig began to edge himself out over the abyss, his left hand grasping David's arm, his right extended round the angle of the wall, farther and farther, while David, his two hands gripping his companion's belt, braced himself to take the strain that grew heavier with every passing moment until he uttered a breathless word of caution.

"Right-o!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig in sudden jubilation, his voice booming louder than ever. "Heave away, pal, heave it is — and gently does it!"

Thus by slow degrees and with David's assistance, Mr. Shrig edged himself back again into safety; then, clapping David blithely on the shoulder, he picked up the lanthorn and began to hasten back whence they had come.

"What was it?" questioned David breathlessly. "What was it, Jasper?"

"Summat as vill sap-rise ye, pal . . . come an' see!"

Very soon they were back in the desolate room of Thomas Yaxley's cottage; there, having carefully closed the secret door and set the lanthorn upon table, Mr. Shrig turned to face David with a strange smile.

"Pal," said he, "I told ye Fortune was wi' me, did n't I?"

"Well, Jasper?"

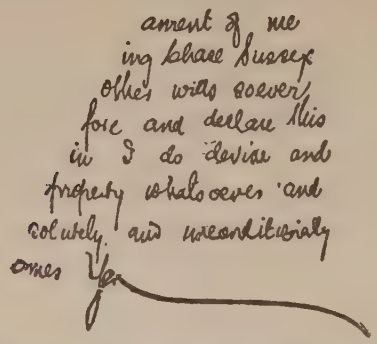
"Well, now I tell you as Fate 's agin' you. . . . Pal — look at this here!"

Slowly and deliberately Mr. Shrig raised his right hand, his keen gaze upon David's face, and laid upon the table an object at sight of which David shrank away, uttering a gasp of horrified dismay; for there, its fouled and rusted steel piercing through crumpled and discoloured paper, its haft gleaming evilly, lay the silver-hilted dagger.

"Pal," said Mr. Shrig, carefully removing the paper from this dreadful thing, "I guessed it might sap-rise ye. . . . It was a-stickin' in vun o' them theer lumps o' fungus as is a-growin' agin' the vall! An' now, look at this here 'alf-sheet o' paper . . . the paper as Sir Nevil was struck dead a-writin' of! I found t'other 'arf days ago, but this is the right 'alf — look'ee here!"

With the utmost care Mr. Shrig smoothed out this torn and crumpled paper discoloured by damp and

fouled by awful stains and, stooping above it, David saw this:



"So ye see, pal, Sir Nevil vas struck dead afore 'e could finish writin' Yaxley's name — killed in the werry act . . . but not by Yaxley, pal! . . . No, not by Yaxley . . . it are n't in reason! Yaxley vould vait till his name were wrote out fair and plain afore 'e struck."

"Perhaps . . . perhaps Yaxley cannot read, Jasper."

"I know as Yaxley can, pal."

"Then mayhap he struck without reading ——"

"No, pal! The person as struck the blow knowed vot Sir Nevil vas a-writing and snatched the paper from under Sir Nevil's werry 'and as he wrote — you can see where 'is pen slipped. The person as murdered Sir Nevil Loring killed 'im to prewent him leavin' the property to Thomas Yaxley. . . . And there y'are, pal! The question I ax is — 'oo benefits? An' you know 'oo — an' so do I. Wherefore, pal, to-night I scratches Thomas Yaxley off of my list . . . the three is — two, pal!"

CHAPTER XLII

How Mr. Shrig was Caught Napping

Down sank David into rickety chair, his head bowed between clasping hands. Quoth Mr. Shrig:

"Fate 's agin' you, pal, an' Fortune 's wi' me!"

"Yes!" said David drearily, "Fate is surely against me, Jasper."

"And bein' agin' you, pal, is conseqvently agin'— us-knows-'oo likevise! . . . An' arter all your hampering o' me, too!" David closed his eyes wearily. "Ye see, pal, Lord love ye — here 's ewidence enough to bring anyone to the gallers!"

David shivered violently.

"And what do you propose to do with the dagger, Jasper?" he enquired, without lifting despondent head.

"No, no!" said Mr. Shrig, leaning across the table. "If I vas to tell you that — you 'd lay to circumwent me again. So mum 's the vord."

"Jasper Shrig, if you are indeed my friend, give me that accursed thing."

"No, pal! And because vhy? Because, though I 'm your friend, I 'm a law officer also — and dooty is ——"

Over went the rickety chair with a crash as David leapt with hand outstretched towards the dagger, to have that hand caught in iron fingers and feel the muzzle of the brass-mounted pistol hard against his ribs. Thus for a moment they stood, David scowling and rigid, Mr. Shrig placid yet determined.

"Siddown, Sir David Loring!" said he at last, "Siddown or, by Hookey, I 'll pull trigger!"

David picked up the fallen chair and, sitting down, stared fiercely up into the Bow Street officer's square, impassive face.

"So you 'll make ye'self an accessory arter the fact, vill ye?"

"Gladly!" answered David. "Heartily! Body and soul!"

"Hum!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, peering. "I ain't ever been in love myself — except vunce, an' then only ——"

"Do you wish money?"

"Being 'uman, I says, Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "And ax's — 'ow much?"

"I will claim my inheritance and you shall name your own sum."

"Bribery now — eh?"

"If possible!" answered David. "And without limit. Suffer the Loring Mystery to remain the Loring Mystery, and you shall be a rich man, Jasper Shrig."

"Vich means as you 're sartin sure in your own mind at least 'oo killed Sir Nevil — eh?"

"Whoever did so wrought a meritorious act!"

"An' committed a Capital Deed! An' them as murders — 'angs ——"

"And I say, no!" cried David. "At least not if I can prevent . . . by any means — any means! . . . O damnation, man — the thought is too horrible, I tell you ——"

"And I tell you that vomen have hung afore this and ——"

"Don't!" cried David. "Don't! . . . Jasper — O Jasper, hush up this hateful business and live a rich man!"

"Lord!" exclaimed Mr. Shrig, folding his arms. "First Mr. Maulyveery tries to come it over me wi' a barker, an' now here 's you offerin' me a fortun' as you ain't got! . . . And look'ee!" he added, as David

scowled, "don't go for to try no more tricks, I'm a peaceable cove, a' even-tempered cove by natur', but the kindest-'earted man in the vorld is apt to grow a bit peevish if aggrawated too often, and I might 'urt you. Howsomever, I ain't to be intimidated nor yet bribed, for dooty is dooty!"

David leaned back in his chair and, happening to glance towards the cupboard, saw that it had no back; his warning shout was drowned in a deafening roar and out went the light. Instantly David was upon his feet, groping feverishly, blindly; and now in the dark was a furious struggling — trampling feet, the sound of blows, a heavy fall; then a voice called upon his name, a hoarse cry that ended in a sudden ghastly wheezing. David leapt haphazard and smote, heard a horrible whistling snuffle and was hurled aside by a mighty arm that spun him reeling to the wall. There leaned he a moment, hearkening to a vague, ceaseless scuffling, above which rose that awful, thin and sharp-drawn wheezing accompanied now by the quick, spasmodic thudding of boot-heels upon the floor; and knowing what this meant, David sought desperately until he found the chair and, whirling it aloft, sprang towards that corner of the room where Death was so busy and smote at random, heard a hissing groan, felt the chair wrenched from him by unseen hands and, plunging in to avoid the answering blow, tripped over a prostrate, groaning shape and fell, to lie half-stunned.

But presently, aware of a painful, labored gasping near-by, he reached out cautious hand and, groping, grasped a square-toed boot, a top-boot there was no mistaking.

"Jasper?" he panted. "Why . . . Jasper . . . how are you?"

Receiving no answer he rose and, gripping his companion beneath the arms, dragged him across the room and out into the sweet, cool night air.

And after some while Mr. Shrig groaned, choked, cursed feebly, and sat up.

"Pal," said he faintly, "if it 'ad n't been for you, burn me but I 'd have been a job for the coroner to sit on! If you 'ad n't stood by pore Jarsper like a true pal . . . O, blow my dickey! . . . Tip me your daddle, pal Davy!"

And so, sitting there beneath the stars, they very solemnly shook hands; which done, Mr. Shrig felt his throat with tender solicitude, hawked plaintively, coughed, and nodded.

"All right now, Jasper?"

"As a trivet, pal! There 's no bones broke, likevise my windpipe 's still vhere it ought to be and I can draw the wital air — thanks to you. But I knows vot a strangler's 'ands feel like, an' I knows vot it is to be choked to death and . . . there 's kinder deaths, pal! But I 've larned vun or two things to-night, an' vun on 'em 's never to carry your wipe along o' your popper!"

Here Mr. Shrig thrust hand into pocket and, after a brief though fierce wrestle, brought thence the brass-mounted pistol entangled in the voluminous folds of a large, bird's-eye handkerchief; quoth he: .

"It ain't often as I 'm caught napping, pal, but vhen so, I acknowledges same — humble! . . . To-night it 's domino Number Five as vas."

"You mean Thomas Yaxley, I think?"

"The same!" nodded Mr. Shrig, preparing to rise. "Another minute and 'e 'd have strangled pore Jasper — same as 'e strangled Joseph Masson, mistaking same for you, pal . . . and Lord knows how many others!"

Here he got to his feet and, pistol in fist, stepped back into the cottage with David at his heels.

"What now, Jasper?"

"There 's two or three things as I don't vant to leave behind, pal — my old crab, for vun . . ."

After some delay the lanthorn was found, shattered by the bullet, but the relighted candle showed Mr. Shrig's hat in a dusty corner and the knotted stick upon the table, but — the silver-hilted dagger was gone.

Mr. Shrig scratched his head, and after gazing at floor and walls and ceiling, began, with David's ready assistance, a thorough and systematic search. High and low they sought it, in places likely and unlikely, but all without avail . . . the fatal dagger had utterly disappeared. Hereupon Mr. Shrig fell to a meditation, whistling softly and very dolefully the while.

"It has been an' wanished — eh, pal?" said he at last.

"Evidently, Jasper."

"Though I don't see no reason for Yaxley to take it."

"Nor I, Jasper."

"If 'e did, pal."

"To be sure, Jasper."

"Hows'ever, it 's a rum go, pal."

"It is, Jasper."

"And as for ghost-'unting, we 've 'ad about enough for vun night, I think — eh?"

"Quite enough!" answered David.

"Then I think, p'r'aps, a pint of 'old' afore goin' to bed might do no manner o' 'arm — how d'you say, pal?"

"The sooner the better, Jasper."

So, having extinguished the light, they shut the door upon the scene of that murderous struggle and, glancing back at the desolate cottage, David thought it more desolate now than ever.

"Talking o' bed," quoth Mr. Shrig, as they trudged away side by side, "do you ever dream — d'ye ever have the night-'orse?"

"Sometimes, Jasper."

"The dream as frets me most, pal, is vun I 'as reg'lar arter too much toasted cheese. . . . I dream as I'm bein' pur-sooed by charwomen . . . in my shirt! Woke up sobbing afore now, I 'ave! But arter to-night, pal, I shall dream o' worse things . . . fingers on my throat! . . . Brickbats, bludgeons and a' occasional chimbley-pot I'm prepared for, pistol-balls I can face when needful, but . . . the 'ands of a strangler . . . !"

Seated cosily in the hospitable shelter of "The Rearing Horse" Inn, they quaffed their ale in a good-fellowship more intimate than heretofore.

"Pal," said Mr. Shrig, as they lighted their chamber candles, "there's things in this here vorld as can't be spoke, and vun on 'em 's gratitood. . . . Good night, pal David, and don't go for to worrit about nobody nor nothing, for though the law is the law, and dooty dooty — friendship is ever and always friendship!"

Alone in his chamber, David locked the door and, seating himself upon the bed, sat a while staring at the flame of his candle; at last, from his pocket he drew the silver-hilted dagger and scowled down at the abhorred thing, his mind perplexed with the old problem — where should he hide it?

CHAPTER XLIII

Which, Having Nothing Whatever to do With Mystery or Murder, Should, very Properly, be Skipped

The estates of Loring being wide, David's many duties often took him far afield, and twice of late, by some happy fortune, he had chanced to meet Anticlea upon his way, and each time at a certain place where a narrow lane joined the highway, an unobtrusive lane shady with trees and screened by lofty hedges.

To-day, having reached this particular place, it was but natural that he should rein-up at the corner of this leafy track, to glance expectant this way and that, and to hearken for the wished-for sound of her horse's cantering hoofs. The sun was hot, even in this leafy shade, but for five long minutes David waited with exemplary patience, busied with happy thought:

How would she greet him? What a fearless horsewoman she was . . . such gracious ease! She ought always to ride — except when she walked, for then she walked like a goddess. . . . And surely hair of that particular shade was the most beautiful in the world . . . !

At the end of ten minutes he was shifting in his saddle to peer behind him, before, and all around; fifteen minutes and he was a gloomy creature with sense of wrong and conscious also of a growing thirst; another slow-dragging ten minutes of vain expectancy, and he was an embittered wretch abandoned of Hope, mocked by Fortune and plagued with an intolerable thirst.

Sighing maledictions on his folly, he was about to ride on, when borne to his ears came the clank of bucket, rattle of chain and creak of winch, speaking of cool well and sweet, sparkling water; David turned his horse and, riding up the lane, came suddenly upon a small inn, or rather hedge-tavern.

Now, upon a bench before this so sequestered hostel, and seeming very much out of place, lounged a slim, elegant gentleman with eyes as bright and as hard as his coat-buttons, and whiskers as glossy, almost, as his boots; an exquisite person whose modish attire and supercilious air awoke in David the opposite passions of envy and contempt.

As David drew rein, the gentleman lifted gold-rimmed eyeglass and having languidly surveyed him and, more particularly, his horse, condescended to address him:

"Dey-vilish fine bit o' blood, that!"

David, not liking the gentleman's face, viewed instead the excellent-fitting coat, the flowered waist-coat, the snowy buckskins and glossy, betasselled boots, feeling his own but clumsy contrivances by comparison, and mentally resolving to purchase other and better at the first opportunity; from which reflections he was aroused by the owner of these desirable garments, his voice louder and more imperious:

"D'ye hear me, there? I say I'm admiring that brute of yours. What's his price?"

"And I was remarking your boots," said David, "Are they for sale?"

"Sale, sir?" exclaimed the gentleman, goggling, "For sale? What the devil! Sale be damned! By Heaven, you're an impertinent bumpkin!"

"And you an obnoxious oaf, sir!"

"Oaf?" gasped the gentleman, "Ha — by Gad, are ye trying to be offensive, then?"

"To the best of my capacity, sir!"

"Are you, egad! Then, by blood, I've a cane for insolent puppies ——"

"And I a whip, sir!"

"Ten thousand devils!" cried the gentleman, leaping to his feet, "d'ye dare threaten me, fellow?"

"Not more than once, sir!" said David, changing the whip to his right hand and preparing to dismount. But at this juncture, out from the inn pattered a small, anxious-faced man who, knuckling an eyebrow to each in turn, broke forth into fervent expostulations.

"Sirs — O sirs, pray ha' done now, ha' done, gents, an' me pore wife in bed expectin' 'er seventh — an' me wi' a pain in me ear-'ole — O pray, sirs, ha' done!"

At this the gentleman cursed the speaker, scowled fiercely at David, took a threatening step towards him, seemed to restrain himself by a violent effort and, turning on his heel, strode into the inn, his hat cocked at ferocious and warlike angle.

"Lordy-lord!" quoth the anxious landlord, looking after him, "Sich a fierce an' furious gent — and me wi' a pain in me ear-'ole — an' me pore wife ——"

"You have my sympathy and good wishes," said David, tapping him soothingly with his riding-whip, "Pray bring me a tankard of ale."

"Thank'ee, sir, and yessir!" sighed the landlord, and pattered away, while David turned his horse that he might watch the high-road; but it seemed he was to be disappointed, Anticlea came not.

"Sich a' owdacious, desp'rit, fierce gent!" sighed the landlord, handing up the foaming tankard, "'E's a-setting cursin' 'eavens 'ard — and in me best parlour, too, and me pore wife ——"

"Here's to her — and the 'seventh'!" smiled David, "God bless 'em!" So saying, he raised the tankard to lip and drank thirstily, tilting his head back and back until, above the tankard-rim, his eyes looked up into other eyes, great, tearful eyes, wide and dark and

full of terrified appeal, that stared down at him through the small lattice beneath the eaves of the inn; even as he stared back, a slim white hand threw wide this casement with frantic haste, a beautiful young face was out-thrust, and a passionate whisper reached him:

"O, sir, please . . . he has locked me in here and I'm afraid! O, come and let me out, I implore . . . O sir, I beseech you——"

David's draught ended in a choking splutter; he coughed and gave the half-emptied tankard to the landlord; when he looked up again, the young and lovely head had vanished.

"Who was that?" he demanded.

"The young lady, sir," answered the landlord in guarded tones, "her as come along o' the fur'ous gent in the chaise . . . broke a spring, they did . . . post-boy's been a-mendin' of it an hour and more . . . Young miss ain't done nothing but sob and moan since they come . . . pore young creeter's afraid of 'im, and no wonder . . . And me wi' a pain in me ear'ole and me wife——"

"Ha!" exclaimed David. "She says the gentleman has locked her in. Why?"

"Sir, I dunno . . . ye see, she wep'—'eart-breakin'!"

"Where is the key?"

"In the gen'leman's pocket, sir."

"Have you another?"

"No, sir——"

"That," said David, springing from the saddle, "is a pity!"

"Why, sir?"

"Because I must either force your door or the gentleman."

"Lord love us, sir—don't do that! No vi'lence, sir, I begs . . . maybe I can find a key as 'll fit."

"Do so!" said David grimly; and having secured his horse, he followed the small landlord indoors and up a somewhat gloomy stair. "This is the room, I think?" he enquired, pausing at a certain door.

"Ay, ay — it be, sir!" twittered the landlord. "But don't, don't be 'asty now ——"

"And locked, sure enough!" said David, trying it.

"Ay, sir! But Lordly-lord, don't go a-breakin' of it down, sir ——"

"Then bring the key."

"But, sir, wot o' the gen'leman — so fierce an' fur'ous ——"

"Damn him! Bring the key."

"Yes, sir — O yessir! Only for 'eaven's sake don' make no fuss, sir! O, Lordy-lord, wot wi' my wife an' me ear-'ole . . . O, wot a day!" Uttering the which lament the anxious landlord hasted away.

Left alone David heard a soft knocking on the door and an hysterical whispering:

"O sir . . . save me, protect me! Don't, O, don't let him get me back into the chaise —— !"

"No," answered David, "no! Rest assured, you are perfectly safe, mam."

Very soon the landlord was back and, finger on lip, in stealthy fashion, set key to lock and opened the door.

Upon the threshold stood a girl whose face, though disfigured by weeping, was of an extraordinary beauty; very young she seemed, and in the wide, truthful eyes, in pallid cheek and quivering lip, he read a stainless innocence.

"Sir — sir," she whispered, reaching out both hands in eager supplication, "you will take me safe away from him? You will take me back to school or my dear father?"

"Surely I will!" he answered, clasping these tremulous hands.

"And, fur 'eavin's sake, don't let the gen'leman 'ear ye, sir!" pleaded the landlord, "A-drinkin' sherry 'e be — in the parlour, and swearin' fit to make y'r 'air stand on end! So creep cautious, sir!"

Swiftly and silently as might be, they descended the creaking stair, but scarcely had they done so, than a door was flung suddenly open and the gentleman appeared. For a moment he goggled in speechless amazement, then, uttering a furious oath, leapt for David's throat and staggered back from the impact of David's ready fist, back into the room whence he had come, back until stayed by the table; there leaned he a moment to clasp damaged eye and glare murder with the other, then turning swiftly he reached for the long riding-coat that lay across a chair-back, and strove to whip a pistol from the pocket, but the lock caught, and before he could free it, David closed with him.

Over went the table with a crash, a chair spun across the room, as they reeled and staggered in fierce wrestle; then David broke away and, judging his distance, smote twice, with stinging left and hard-driving right, and down went the gentleman to lie with arms wide-tossed and head in a corner. Instantly David caught up the riding-coat, and removing the pistols from its pockets tossed them out through the open lattice and turned to see the terrified girl swaying in the doorway.

"O God!" she cried hysterically, "Have you killed him?"

"No — no, indeed!" panted David and, running forward, caught her as she fell. For a moment, clasping her thus, he strove to calm her until, seeing she had swooned, he raised her in his arms, and bore her out into the fragrant, sunny air. Holding her thus in close embrace he seated himself on the bench and, espying his tankard within reach, caught it up, with some desperate notion of using the ale to recover her, since he had no water; indeed, he had already moistened her

brow and lips when, hearing a sound of horse-hoofs, he glanced up to see Anticlea frowning down at him from her saddle.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, in grateful innocence. "Thank God you are here . . . Look at this poor child!"

"I see her!" answered Anticlea, but with look and tone wherein was neither sympathy nor kindness: "She seems very young, and — yes . . . very lovely! And what beautiful hair!"

"Yes, yes," said David distressfully, as he stared down at the lovely, pale face pillowed on his breast, "but O, pray help me, Anticlea — some water!"

"Indeed, sir, but I think the beer will do — if she drink it. . . . And take heed to her beautiful tresses . . . so much more becoming than fiery, hateful red! . . . And very sure I am that you can contrive much better without me . . . she will recover sooner, perhaps — or, at least, more gracefully — when you are alone. Good afternoon, Mr. Hedges; take care of the poor young, beautiful creature — though, to be sure, I know you will!"

So saying, Anticlea cut viciously at her horse until he reared, wheeled him on his hind-legs, and galloped away, leaving David staring after her in mute but angry astonishment.

Then beholding the face pillowed against him, so young, so beautiful and sweetly innocent, David forgot all else but her helplessness and called lustily for water, until out pattered the distracted landlord with bowl and towel, himself full of moaning lamentation:

"O Lord, sir, 'ere 's the gen'leman 'alf dead and a-calling for 'is pistols, and me wi' me ear-'ole ——"

"Hold the basin!" said David.

"And me pore wife ——"

"Give me the towel!" said David.

"Look, sir, the poor young miss be a-comin' to . . . I seen 'er buzzim 'eave——"

"Be off!" said David.

And presently the girl sighed, moaned, opened lovely eyes and, finding herself in David's arms, flushed rosily and hastened to slip from his embrace, very full of timid apologies and eager, breathless expressions of gratitude.

"And pray," enquired David, seeing her thus recovered, "who are you, mam, and how came you at the mercy of such scoundrelly person?"

"Because I was too confiding — because I was silly, foolish . . . but I was very anxious, he told me my father was ill."

"Who is your father, child?"

"He is Doctor Peabody, sir. Perhaps you have heard of him?"

"You mean," exclaimed David, "Peabody, the People's Practitioner?"

"O yes, sir! Everybody knows father, my dear child-man, especially the poor folk," said she proudly. "He is so kind and clever and simple! He calls me his Salvation . . . I, who might have been his sorrow and shame but for you! O, how may I ever thank you?"

"By saying where you would have me take you," said David, and espying the gentleman's pistols where they had fallen, he went and picked them up.

"I am at school in Brighthelmstone, sir," answered the girl, eyeing these weapons very much askance. "I am a pupil-teacher. . . . Three weeks ago I met that — hateful gentleman, Mr. Eastman. . . . To-day he called and told me my beloved father was ill and had sent for me, and so, though I felt a little afraid, I got into the chaise he had waiting and we drove away . . . and then . . . I knew my fears of the man were justified! Thank Heaven the chaise broke down . . .

and you came! And now, sir . . . O pray, however am I to get back to school, it is so far from here — miles and miles?"

"Well, you spoke of a chaise ——"

"No, no — that belongs to the gentleman."

"Good! He shall lend it you!"

"But he may refuse, sir ——"

"No matter!"

"And it may not be ready."

"We will go and see. But first let me make sure of these things!" So saying David crossed to the horse-trough and therein dropped the gentleman's pistols; which done, he turned into the stable-yard, the girl keeping beside him, and here found a grimy and somewhat profane being, in the leather cap, short coat and top-boots of a postboy, busily harnessing his animals to a dusty chaise.

"All right, sir, all right!" he cried. "Ready for you in fi' minutes — and dang all, I says!"

"Very good!" answered David, "the sooner we start the better, for we must reach Brighthelmstone before dark."

At this the Postboy looked up to stare at David with very round eyes and mouth agape:

"But — but blow me," he stammered, "you ain't my gent!"

"But this is your lady, I think."

"Werry true, sir — but ——"

"And we are going to take her back to Brighthelmstone."

"Are we, sir? But wot o' my gent?"

"He will remain here."

"O will 'e, sir? I 'd like to 'ear wot 'e 's got to say to that!"

"Why, then, go and tell him what I say and you 'll surely hear him to very excellent advantage — only hurry!" Hereupon, leaving his horses in charge

of an ostler, the Postboy touched his cap and entered the inn forthwith . . . whence, after a brief space, issued a sudden, rageful roar, and thereafter the Postboy himself, his eyes rounder than ever.

"Well?" enquired David, smiling a little grimly.

"Werry well indeed, sir!" nodded the Postboy, "I never 'eard a gen'leman say so much in one minute nor more to the p'int in all my days — and I 've 'eard a few."

"Then suppose you drive us back?"

"Ay, sir . . . but who 's to pay — thirty shillin's the figure?"

"Here 's your money!" said David, counting the sum into the Postboy's grimy palm. "And now let us be moving."

"Werry good, sir!"

And so, having aided the girl into the chaise, David mounted his horse and away they went, leaving the gentleman (anything but languid now, and with a swollen eye) to flourish futile cane and roar unheard anathemas after them.

CHAPTER XLIV

Which Telleth Somewhat of "Lovers' Meetings"

They had travelled some mile or so along the high-road when David beheld, far before them, a swirl of dust that drew rapidly nearer and nearer until, amid this rolling cloud, appeared a horseman, a wild-eyed, desperate-looking man who galloped a foam-spattered animal in headlong career.

"Pull over!" he shouted furiously, for David, recognising this desperate rider, had thrown out an arm to stay him. "Out o' my way — pull over or, by God, I'll ride ye down!"

"Father . . . O, father!" cried a voice, and out from chaise-window came a hand, an arm, a lovely, eager face, at sight of which the horseman checked his furious career.

"Salvation!" he cried, "O, Sally!" and leaping from his horse he ran, stumbling, but with arms reached out in joyous welcome.

Then, wheeling his horse, David rode away, leaving them to each other.

But presently, as he cantered between the blooming hedgerows, he was aware of shouts behind him and clattering hoofs, and turning his head, espied Mr. Peabody in hot pursuit.

"Ha, and will ye run off, sir?" cried the Poor Person's Practitioner, riding at him with right hand outstretched. "Will ye run off and defraud me of the right, the privilege, of speaking my gratitude? How was I to recognise you in your new habit and myself so distraught? However! God bless ye, friend — you

that are the salvation of my Salvation! Ay, ay — she 's told me how you thrashed that damned and thrice-accursed scoundrel . . . and here come I, eager to speak my — our — gratitude . . . and I cannot . . . there are no words . . . O, give me your hand, sir! . . . Also I owe you thirty shillings — behold it, sir!"

"Tush!" exclaimed David.

"Tush, but take it, friend!" And Mr. Peabody thrust the money upon him. "And now," continued Mr. Peabody, as their hands met, "you are to come with us, nay, sir, you must — Sally says so! She tells me she does n't even know your name and, for that matter, neither do I — at least, I am given to understand that your Christian name is David."

"Then, sir, pray call me so. But how did you learn this?"

"From one Bowker — Benjamin Bowker, a prisoner in the pestilential lock-up at Lewes; he described you very accurately as I remembered you first, your head in a bandage."

"Poor Ben Bowker, I must see him!" said David.

"Then come with me, sir, and I will bring you to him. Moreover, he wrote you a letter; I have it here!"

So while David turned his horse, Mr. Peabody unbuttoned dusty coat and drew thence the letter in question; then, walking their horses side by side, David opened the missive and in characters scrawled with much painful care read this:

"Dear Friend

They have nabbed me at last for a job as I never done which comes hard-like. So here I lays a sick man and like to come out feet first and stiff which don't signify for life has never brought me no luck yet and I 'm ready to be done with it for good. Only there 's my little Nan — which do come mortal hard-like her to be alive and me to have to go without finding of her after all these long years chum. So I am a-sending you her ring her wedding-ring as she never

wore which I have carried all these years round my neck chum. If you should ever chance to find her give it her and say Ben was true living and will be true dead. Likewise there's a matter of two hundred pound in Lewes bank for her if you find her if not keep it friend and think sometimes of

BEN BOWKER.

P.S. On second thoughts failing my Nan you might share the money with her old mother and oblige

Yours respectfully
B. B."

Having perused this letter, David folded it away with gentle fingers, and took the ring Mr. Peabody held out towards him; a plain gold circlet somewhat the worse for wear, its pristine brightness long since dimmed. And staring down at this small, battered thing which Ben Bowker had borne and treasured through the long bitter years of his servitude — reading in this ring something of the tragedy and heartbreak of these two ruined lives, David blinked suddenly and bowed his head above it.

"Ay," nodded Mr. Peabody, "a tragical tale! Poor Ben Bowker. However!"

"And now he is very ill, it seems!" said David, stowing the ring carefully away.

"Was!" corrected the People's Practitioner, "The verb is in the past tense, David, I rejoice to say . . . I will call you David, if I may?"

"O pray do! And Bowker is better?"

"He is, thanks to the P.P.P.'s unfailing specifics! . . . And gaol-fever, mark ye, is a disease that few of your regular practitioners trouble about, for prisoners are only prisoners, and the sooner done with the better. And yet prisoners are human — ay, even the worst of 'em! Hence I quack among 'em when needful and to good purpose, yes — with reasonable success! However!"

"Mr. Peabody, I begin to appreciate that you are——"

"Merely the Poor Persons' Practitioner, sir, with a boundless — ay, a limitless practice. You will come and see Bowker, I think?"

"Why, surely! Is he still in gaol?"

"He was liberated yesterday, sir, and is now at 'The Harbour' — with a capital aitch, if you please!"

"'Harbour'?" repeated David, puzzled.

"My recently acquired cottage, sir — that is to say, ours, hers — my Salvation's . . . just a mile this side Lewes. And pray not a word to her, David! 'T is a cottage she hath often admired and dreamed of our possessing some day — and that day is to-day . . . New-painted, new-whitewashed, new-thatched — a surprise for my Sally. And I call it 'The Harbour' because I have been shipwrecked, have known the horror of the abysmal deeps . . . but, thanks to my pure, sweet Sally, have won to a secure haven at last! However! . . . But see, she has stopped the chaise, let us hasten."

Having overtaken the vehicle, they rode on in company, silent for the most part, since each was busied with his thoughts, until, leaving the high-road, Mr. Peabody swung off at right angles into a grassy by-lane, and down this lane David saw Anticlea riding towards them at a gentle amble, head a-droop like one lost in thought. But no sooner did she catch sight of David and his companions than she frowned, whipped her steed to a gallop and flashed by them, all in a moment.

"Oho!" quoth Mr. Peabody, turning to glance after her. "The proud lady of Loring Wood, I think?"

"Yes," said David, frowning in his turn. "May I ask you to wait here a while? You shall not be kept long," and reining about he set off in pursuit.

Reaching the high-road he saw Anticlea riding

slowly some half-mile ahead, and touching his horse with the whip, he broke into a canter, whereupon Anticlea immediately urged her horse to a gallop; in went David's spurs, his powerful animal bounded forward, but hard as he rode, Anticlea maintained her lead, swaying gracefully to every stride of her raking sorrel and, be sure, never once deigning a backward glance. David plied his spurs and Anticlea her whip, and thus they raced a while until, either because she wearied of it, or thought she had tried him sufficiently, or merely because she was a woman, she suffered herself to be overtaken and, reining her horse to a canter, was prepared to greet her determined pursuer with a smile, when she was aware of a somewhat dusty countenance frowning at her beneath a very dusty hat, and a masterful hand which, seizing her horse's snaffle, brought him to a sudden standstill. Instantly her smile vanished, and as David frowned at her, she frowned back at him.

"What is the meaning of this?" she challenged. "How dare you stop me!"

"I wish you to come back and meet my friends," he answered, his soft drawl more pronounced than usual.

"And I refuse!"

"And," he continued gently, "I promised we would not keep them waiting long——"

"Loose my horse! Let me pass!"

"No, mam!"

Anticlea raised her whip threateningly, whereat David laughed and (wise for once) leaned near suddenly, clasped compelling arm about her waist and, crushing her to him, kissed her (despite the fidgeting of their horses, which somewhat marred his aim). Thus his first kiss lighted upon her ear, his second upon her cheek, but his third full upon her pouting, rosy lips.

And she meekly suffered this caress, all unresisting — perhaps because she felt she knew struggling would be vain, or a little dangerous, or perhaps because ——

Howbeit, for a long moment she lay submissive in his embrace until David felt her lips quiver responsive under his, until she sighed and murmured plaintively and raised her whip-hand (but wondrous gently), a pleading hand which, touching his cheek, repelled yet caressed him, both at once.

So David freed her, and she, gathering loosened reins, looked at her horse's twitching ears, the dusty road, the green hedgerows — at anything but David.

"You — are — very sudden!" said she at last, a little breathlessly.

"And you," he answered, "are very beautiful with that gentle look in your dear eyes."

At this she laughed happily, and glancing at him from the corners of these same eyes, flushed to see his adoring look.

"And where did you leave your friends?" she questioned in her soft, sweet voice.

"Heavens — I had forgotten them!" he exclaimed.

"O, David!" said she reproachfully. "And you promised not to keep them waiting!"

"Then you 'll come back with me, Anticlea?"

"Of course!" she smiled. And so they presently rode back together.

Now, as they went David told her something of Ben Bowker's history, and who so tenderly sympathetic as Anticlea, insomuch that, checking their horses to a walk, he read to her Ben's letter, and seeing the tears in her eyes would have kissed them away but that she showed him the People's Practitioner trotting towards them astride his nag.

Mr. Peabody, having been duly presented, bowed with that easy, dignified courtesy which only birth and breeding can bestow. Learning, as they rode on to-

gether, that Anticlea knew nothing of his Sally's rescue, he launched forthwith into a vivid account of the whole affair, dwelling with unction upon the knocking-down of the would-be ravisher: "And I only wish," he ended, "I do most heartily wish I had been there to see the villain tumble!"

And thus at last they reached again that grassy lane where Sally was busy gathering honeysuckle, watched by a postboy who alternately yawned and picked his teeth with a straw.

"Madam," said Mr. Peabody, as they halted, "here is my Salvation — Sally, I present you to Mistress Anticlea Loring ——"

"No!" said Anticlea, head proudly up-flung, "I am no Loring, thank Heaven . . . I am nobody's child, but they tell me my mother's name was Benton."

Looking up, Sally beheld a tall, handsome creature whose prideful bearing was softened by eyes that viewed her with such wistful yearning; looking down, Anticlea saw a face whose gentle beauty was the more lovely by the reason of its quick, intuitive sympathy and understanding.

So for a moment they viewed each other with feminine eyes keenly critical; then Sally smiled and took a shy step forward, and in that moment Anticlea the impetuous was out of the saddle and had met her with both hands outstretched.

"Come," said Mr. Peabody, dismounting, "they won't miss us for a moment. Leave our horses with the Postboy." So saying he led David a little farther up the lane, and then halted suddenly to point: "The Harbour!" he announced in a hoarse whisper.

At first David could see no more than a very lofty hedge wherein was set a very small green gate; but drawing nearer he made out a roomy cottage seated snugly behind this hedge, surely the neatest, cosiest of cottages brave with paint and whitewash and golden

thatch, its latticed casements twinkling demurely beneath the shady eaves of steep-pitched roof.

"What d'ye think of it?" enquired Mr. Peabody a little anxiously, "No — what will she think of it? However! Here she comes, let's ask her." As he spoke Sally came towards them, deep in conversation with Anticlea, but beholding the cottage with its bravery of new thatch, paint, and whitewash, she halted in sudden dismay:

"Why, father," she exclaimed, "O sir, 't is the dear old place we have dreamed of so often! . . . O, father — someone must have bought it at last!"

"Someone has, my love. D'ye like it?"

"You know how I love it," she sighed, "But . . . if it belongs to someone else — some stranger . . ." Mr. Peabody chuckled. "Father?" she cried breathlessly, "O, father . . . do you mean ——?"

"Ay, I do, Salvation! I mean I have bought it. 'T is ours, child, yours . . . your very own . . ."

"O, father . . . my dear, wonderful child!" and turning, she caught the People's Practitioner in her arms and hugged him, her flushed cheek against his dusty coat.

"But . . . won't you open the gate, Sally?" he questioned a little hoarsely, "open the gate and bid us in?"

And indeed with what a sweet, shy grace she welcomed them to this the first true home she had ever known; how quick her bright eyes to heed the loving care which had gone to its adornment, how ready her tongue to voice her gratitude.

"'T is all just as we used to dream it long ago — only better!" she sighed, in an ecstasy.

"Then suppose," suggested Mr. Peabody, his round face beaming, his eyes a little brighter than usual behind their large spectacles, "suppose you step inside, my love, and brew us some tea?"

"Tea!" repeated Sally, with a little joyous scream. "Do you mean it is furnished . . . ready to live in——?"

"Go and see, my dear."

"O, come!" cried the girl, and catching Anticlea by the hand they vanished into the cottage together.

"And now," said Mr. Peabody, slipping his arm in David's, "let us find the unfortunate Bowker."

Behind the cottage was a large and goodly orchard, and here, in a high-backed elbow-chair, sat Ben Bowker, his grizzled head bowed in slumber, his square face paler and more grim and lined than ever.

"Do not let us wake him," said David, turning away. "He is alive, thanks to you, but now is my turn. Lend me the chaise and I will bring someone who shall avail him more than all your specifics——"

"Aha—a woman, of course. Go fetch her, David, whoever she be. This is 'The Harbour'—with a capital aitch. Go fetch her!"

"Thank you," answered David, hesitating, "but I think perhaps, under the circumstances, it were better someone came with me . . ."

"Much better!" nodded Mr. Peabody, "I'll send her to you." And away he went, chuckling.

Thus very soon came Anticlea to find David giving directions to the Postboy.

"Where are you taking me?" she questioned, as the chaise swung out into the high-road.

"To a little huckster's shop in Lewes, just beyond the bridge, name of Martin . . . to Nancy. I want you to tell her Ben Bowker is found . . . is waiting for her."

"O, David!"

"And to give her this ring, it is her wedding-ring—the ring she never wore, the ring Bowker has carried for her sake all these weary years . . ."

So Anticlea took the small, battered thing and sat looking down at it very wistfully.

"Some day, Anticlea, I shall give you such a ring! When shall it be? When will you marry me?"

"O David," she answered in soft, weeping voice, "remember my hateful red hair——"

"I love it!" he answered, and kissed it.

"So horrible and fiery, David! And I am like it ——fierce and passionate, my dear . . ."

"I love you!" he answered, and kissed her cheek.

"But I am so sudden in my angers, David . . . so wild—it frightens me sometimes! O, how may I marry you, David—you so good, so strong and gentle, and I so——"

David kissed her mouth.

It was something over a mile to Lewes, and surely never was distance covered so rapidly; at least so said David and so thought Anticlea, for they had turned into the High Street and David was still asking "The Question" when the chaise pulled up before a small shop whose dingy sign bore the name "Martin."

Entering the dark little shop, they beheld a small motherly woman who, recognising them for scions of "The Quality", curtseyed and begged to know their pleasure.

"If you are Mrs. Martin," said David, "we are here for . . . your daughter Nancy."

"O, sir!" exclaimed the little woman in sudden trepidation, wringing her hands distressfully, "Wot for, please? My Nancy bean't strong, sir, and——" But leaning forward, Anticlea clasped these tremulous hands and, smiling into the old creature's troubled eyes and whispering certain words, showed her the ring:

"O, my lady . . . !" exclaimed the little old woman, "O, I do thank the good Lord! This be the physic shall cure my Nan! O come your ways, lady —come and tell my Nancy."

So Anticlea followed whither she was led, leaving David alone; but very soon she was back again with

Nancy, an eager, trembling creature who curtseyed to David with a broken murmur of thanks and followed Anticlea out to the chaise.

And now the Postboy cracked his whip and away they went at a gallop; yet, fast though they travelled, surely never seemed mile so long, to Nancy at least, who sat dumb and rigid, her wide gaze always bent yearningly upon the road before them.

But all journeys end soon or late, and at last they turned off into the grassy lane. Then, all at once, Nancy was upon her feet, and before the chaise could stop had sprung forth, to stand a moment staring at the grim-faced man with grey hair and lined features who limped slowly towards her; then, uttering a sudden cry, she ran forward to throw herself upon her knees before this man, with yearning arms reached up to him.

"Ben!" she sobbed, "O, Ben . . . my dear — my dear . . . forgive me!"

And Ben Bowker, unheeding staring Postboy and snorting horses and all else in the world, caught those supplicating hands in his, and sinking upon his knees, even as she, drew her close within his embrace:

"Why, Nan!" said he. "My little Nan — at last!"

CHAPTER XLV

Her Grace Dissertates on Mr. Shrig's Methods

"David Hedges," quoth the Duchess, beckoning imperiously, "come and sit you here!"

She was enshrined in solitary state upon one of the benches before "The Rearing Horse" (to the no small consternation of its smock-frocked frequenters), for, though her very small feet scarcely reached earth, she nevertheless contrived to look the very great lady that she was: "David Hedges," said she, "I have awaited you here some time; your duties keep you late, it seems?"

David bowed.

"And Anticlea also!"

David bowed a trifle lower.

"Hum!" quoth the Duchess. "That settles it! The sooner I take her to London, the better! Do not glare, Mr. Meadow, or attempt to look haughty; remember your plough, sir, and — sit down, do!"

David obeyed, though a trifle stiff in the back about it.

"You are acquainted with that Shrig person, I think?"

"He is my friend, mam."

"A Bow Street person?" Her Grace shivered with a sound which, in any lady less great, might have been termed a sniff. "Your friend, indeed, sir?"

"Truly, mam, for he was a friend to me in my need!"

"Very well, sir. Then perhaps you can tell me what he means by persecuting poor Belinda?"

"Persecuting her, mam?"

"Well, perhaps the word is extreme . . . but he has met her frequently of late on her errands of mercy — she is for ever ministering to some needy soul . . . the man has been seen carrying her basket — the thing has been remarked!"

"Astonishing!" exclaimed David.

"Not in the least, sir! The man, of course, hath some purpose to serve, the question is — what?"

"Heaven knows, mam!"

"Doubtless, sir — but do you?"

"No, lady!"

"Have you any suggestion to offer? Can you hazard a guess?"

"None, mam."

"Hum! You are a somewhat obtuse young man, I think! Yesterday I happened to step into the church yonder, Belinda is frequently there, and sure enough I found her listening entranced to this Shrig person. . . . He was talking of birds, sir."

"Birds?" repeated David.

"He was describing to the poor little soul a piping bullfinch he kept at home in a wicker cage which he had taught to whistle 'Sally in our Alley' — I mean the bullfinch, of course. Did you know he was a bird-fancier?"

"No, mam, and why in the world he should ——"

"Because poor Belinda dotes on birds and all gentle, small creatures like herself, of course."

"Why do you call her 'poor,' mam?"

"Because, being a woman, she was born to suffer . . . but Fate, it seems, preordained Belinda to endure more than her share — she is altogether too gentle, too shy, too confiding for this hard, cynical world — and she has suffered accordingly, gentle soul. I have only learned to really know her of late . . . and to know her is to love her . . ."

"Yes, indeed, mam——"

"Pray do not interrupt! Now as to this Shrig man —he piques my curiosity! Being his friend, what do you know of him?"

"That he is loyal to friendship and duty."

"Tush! What more, sir?"

"Nothing, lady," answered David, shaking his head.

"Then you are a very unobservant young man, Mr. Fields! Listen to me! First, this Police Person seems everything that he is not, and, not being what he seems, seems perfectly natural . . . I hope I am clear?"

"Ye-e-s," said David, a little dubiously.

"Second: he is here to investigate a . . . certain occurrence, and proceeds to do it by apparently doing nothing at all in the most determined manner . . . And yet—Eustace Maulverer is worrying himself to skin and bone! Why? . . . Then, again, this Shrig friend of yours, whom you don't seem to know, is a ubiquitous creature—he is here, he is there, and then, again, he is not—and always when least expected! Last night, for instance, just before twelve o'clock, I happened to go downstairs to the library for my Thomson's 'Seasons'—I always read the 'Seasons' when I cannot sleep, I find them soothing—and as I went downstairs whom should I meet but Mr. Shrig coming up, silent as a shadow . . ."

"Good heaven!" exclaimed David. "But, mam, he and I retired together last night, I heard him shut and lock his bedroom door——"

"To be sure, sir! And the moment you were safely in bed, he was out and away, of course—and appeared to me out of the midnight shadows of Loring Chase. Had I been an ordinary female I should have screamed and promptly swooned away; as it was, I sat down upon the stairs and demanded an explanation forthwith. He informed me there was no window a cracks-

man or law officer who knew his profession could not open. . . . Indeed, he told me many things; and finding him interesting and the stairs being draughty, we descended to the parlour and partook of sherry and biscuits. . . . Among other things he informed me he expected to lay the ghost finally and clear up the Loring Mystery — to-night."

"To-night?" repeated David, starting.

"Precisely, Mr. Hedgerow, though you need not become excited and raise your voice — as he did."

"How, mam? Jasper Shrig — excited?"

"Indeed, sir, and spoke so loud I was apprehensive he would wake someone. . . . At last, we having finished the sherry and most of the biscuits, I bade him good-night and left him to his ghostly researches — and reaching my chamber door, surprised poor Eustace on the landing as pallid as a ghost himself."

"To-night!" repeated David.

"Tut, tut — don't look so tragic, David, 't will be as well, perhaps, to have the hateful matter cleared up," said the Duchess, rising. "Come, sir, you shall give me your arm along the road."

As they walked, Her Grace talked of many things, but David paid scant heed, even when she spoke of her own and Anticlea's imminent departure for London; insomuch that, reaching the gates of Loring Chase, she turned and left him abruptly with this Parthian shaft:

"Truly I think you are a very dull young man, Mr. Woods!"

Left alone, David wandered on, lost in uneasy speculation, for if the Loring Mystery were indeed solved to-night . . . ? Uneasiness grew to anxiety, and this, in turn, to sick apprehension. He must see Jasper at once! Ay, but where to find him?

Reaching that narrow by-lane beyond the village where stood Thomas Yaxley's cottage, David halted

undecidedly; but it seemed that Fortune favoured him, for as he stood thus, chin in hand, he heard a murmur of voices and, glancing up, espied Mr. Shrig some distance up this lane in earnest converse with three strange, formidable-looking men.

Thither strode David, so fast that he was near enough to hear Mr. Shrig's final words ere the three strangers touched their hats and took themselves off, leaving Mr. Shrig to advance towards David, beaming in cheery welcome.

"Who were those fellows, Jasper?"

"Just three lads o' mine, pal. And how goes it?"

"What did you mean by bidding them be on their posts at ten o'clock to-night?"

"Jest a little bit o' business, pal——"

"Business, Jasper? Ay, I hear you mean to clear up the Loring Mystery to-night?"

"I told ye that last evening, pal."

"No, you only hoped to do so, then! Are you so sure at last, Jasper? O, man, are you quite sure——?"

"And sarten, pal. The six is — vun!"

"And your . . . your proofs, Jasper?"

"Well, seein' as you 've took 'em, pal, I 'll 'ave to make shift as best I may——"

"Do you expect to . . . arrest . . . anyone to-night, Jasper?"

"Why, pal, since you ax me I 'll answer you plain and p'inted — I ain't so sure . . . and vot 's more I don't expect — hullo!"

From somewhere close by rose sudden sounds of infantile woe, and out from the hedge toddled a very small, golden-headed imp whose rosy face, though happily begrimed, was just now convulsed with tearful, wailing grief.

"Hullo, my duck, and vot 's the trouble?" enquired Mr. Shrig, stooping to pat the small tousled head;

whereat the child ceased his wailing to suck at grimy thumb and survey his questioner with solemn, appraising eyes; which scrutiny proving satisfactory, he took possession of Mr. Shrig's thick and hairy forefinger and smiled.

"Don wanth Dimmy!" he announced, withdrawing moist thumb for the purpose.

"Is that so, duck?" answered Mr. Shrig, stroking his chin. "I don't eggsackly tvig your lingo, but us 'll see ye right, my son . . . I s'pose you don't 'appen to know 'is lordship, pal?"

"No," answered David, stooping to touch the child's soft cheek.

"She'd know, and you can lay to that!" said Mr. Shrig.

"Who, Jasper?"

"Number Vun, pal — Miss Belindy . . . Let's see," said he, consulting massive silver watch, "six forty-five! She'll be sittin' along o' Dame Bowden now, unless she's a-readin' to Mrs. March's little gal, otherwise she'll be talkin' to old Jole ——"

"And pray how do you know all this?"

"Observation, pal ——"

"You mean spying!"

"Do I, pal? Well, p'r'aps I do, they're much of a muchness, d'ye see."

"You have been seen carrying her basket . . ."

"Werry true!" nodded Mr. Shrig. "An' precious 'eavy it were — full o' small comforts for her old villagers."

"You contrive to worm yourself into her good graces ——"

"Vorm, eh?" quoth Mr. Shrig reflectively. "Vorm, is it?"

"Were you ever a bird-fancier?"

"Ah! I fancies 'em all — 'specially when they vistles. But that 'ere vorm, now ——"

"Did you ever own a piping bullfinch?"

"No. But then I once knowed a cove as did. . . . An' talkin' o' that theer vord 'vorm'——"

"And by such means you set yourself to win this lady's confidence, hoping through her simplicity to trap her into some admission damaging to . . . to one she loves——"

"Meaning one as you love, pal—'er, Number Two—us-knows-'oo! But 'arking back to that theer vord 'vorm'—though I ain't by natur' a squeamish cove, still I wenters to think as 'vorm,' 'twixt pals, is coming it a bit strongish-like!" Here Mr. Shrig paused to glance down at their toddling companion who still held him fast by the finger.

"Are ye tired, my duck?" he enquired. The small head nodded vigorously, whereupon Mr. Shrig stooped and swung the child to broad shoulder; perched thus aloft, he clutched Mr. Shrig's bull-neck in chubby arm, kicked diminutive heels and gurgled ecstatic.

"Talkin' o' Number Vun, pal, yonder she comes!"

They were close upon the village by now and, glancing about, David espied Miss Belinda approaching, a large, empty basket upon her arm.

She greeted them with her gentle smile and reached up slim hand to caress the child, who beamed and crowed in welcome:

"Why, 't is little John Crook," said she. "His poor mother will be so relieved, John is always getting lost. You seem very fond of children, Mr. Shrig!"

"Fond ain't the vord, mam! If I'd 'appened to be blessed vith a little lamb like Johnny 'ere, I dunno as I vould n't qvit the law an' take up vith a kinder perfession."

"And John seems to love you!"

"That 'e do, mam! Bless 'is little 'eart an' limbs!"

"Then indeed, sir, if children love you I'm sure you are a very kind—a very good man."

Mr. Shrig glanced furtively at David's scowling face and coughed.

"Why, as to that, mam," he answered, a little diffidently, "if I ain't quite as good as I should ought to be, I'm better than I might be, p'r'aps — though that ain't nothing to brag about, neether, seeing as I ain't no better than I am, d'ye see."

"But I'm sure you must be a very gentle, kind man in spite of your dreadful trade ——"

"Pray suffer me to take your basket, Miss Belinda," said David.

"Thank you, sir," she smiled, as he took it from her arm, "though, indeed, I am quite used to it ——"

"Dreadful, mam?" quoth Mr. Shrig. "Ah, to be sure, I deals in crime, mam, sooicide, or — as you might say — feller-de-see, also the Capital Act, or — as you might put it — Murder. Yes, crimes is meat an' drink to me, mam, though I'll own they ain't pleasant — 'specially murder!"

"May I not see you as far as Loring Chase, lady?" David enquired desperately.

"Thank you, Mr. David, not until we have taken little John safe home . . . Murder!" she repeated, with a gentle sigh. "O, surely it is a dreadful thing that may only win forgiveness through Love made perfect . . . For love that is not of self may banish all hatred, every fear and sorrow — may wash away every tear, and make the heart young again . . . because such love is of the Infinite, which is God. You believe in God, sir?"

Mr. Shrig walked some distance, seeming to debate the question within himself, but presently, meeting the gentle eyes raised to his own in such mute though anxious questioning, he answered in voice so very different to his usual gruff, hearty tone, that David glanced at him in surprise:

"Yes, lady — sometimes . . . when I talks wi' werry young children or . . . angels."

"I too love children," she nodded, "and I have dreamed of angels. To dream is sometimes better — O, much better than to live . . . Sometimes I have dreamed myself dead and perfected . . . O, surely it will be glorious to be dead, to be lifted by kind Death up to the completer living."

As she spoke Miss Belinda raised her eyes to the blue of the cloudless sky and walked thus a while like one in an ecstasy; then she sighed deeply and stopped at the gate of a trim cottage with a garden before it gay with flowers.

"This is where little John lives," said she, "and there is Jim Crook, little John's father!"

Sure enough down narrow garden path the Carrier was hurrying to meet them, a smart, upstanding figure, tight and sailor-like, from neatly-trimmed whiskers to polished boots and gaiters.

"Why, John, y' young lubber!" he exclaimed joyfully, shaking brawny fist in the begrimed and chubby face of his offspring, who promptly shrieked with rapture. "God bless ye, Miss B'lindy, mam," said the Carrier gratefully, "might ha' knowed you 'd ha' convoyed 'im safe . . . my wife's that worrited about 'im, and me only just in from my round. Thank'ee likewise, Mr. Shrig, sir . . . gimme the young waggabone! My best respects, gen'leman!"

So saying, the Carrier tucked his son beneath one arm, made a leg to Miss Belinda, shook hands with David and Mr. Shrig, and hurried off triumphant, his small son kicking plump legs and gurgling rapturously.

"And now, mam," said Mr. Shrig, "us will see ye on your way, if agreeable——"

"Perhaps you would prefer to be alone, Miss Belinda?" David suggested.

"O no, no — pray come," she smiled. "Tell me, Mr. Shrig, shall you stay in Loring much longer?" she enquired as they walked on together.

"That depends on . . . the ghost, mam."

"Ah, the ghost!" she sighed, "I used not to believe in such — once."

"But you do — now, mam — eh?"

"I believe that unhappy souls may come back sometimes . . . indeed, I know!"

"You 've never ackchally seen this here ghost, 'ave you, mam?"

"Alas! — not yet," she answered sadly. "It seems I am too unworthy — but I hope to . . . some day."

"Do you, mam?"

"O yes — yes! I am hoping, living for that! Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Shrig?"

"Well, mam, I 'm expecting to speak wi' this 'ere ghost ——"

"To speak?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands with a trembling eagerness. "O, when? . . . Where, sir — I beseech you, where? . . . You will suffer me to be with you, sir — O pray!"

They had reached the tall iron gates opening upon that sombre avenue of ancient trees beyond which rose the wide front of Loring Chase; now, as they paused here, Miss Belinda caught Mr. Shrig's arm in her small, eager hands, gazing up imploringly into his face, a look which Mr. Shrig seemed unwilling to meet, for he kept his gaze fixed upon the distant gables of the great house as he answered:

"For sure, mam, for sure . . . 't would n't be nowise complete vithout you, mam. . . . And I 'm expectin' to talk wi' this ghost — to-night — in Sir Nevil Loring's own room 'twixt 'alf arter eleven and midnight. . . . I 'm expecting and likevise I 'm 'oping, lady, as this ghost is a-going to tell me who done the deed."

"Yes, yes — of course!" she answered, with a quick nod. "He must speak at last, he will, I know — in his own good time . . . To-night . . . in Nevil's room

. . . I shall be there, sir . . . Good evening, gentlemen . . . and thank you, dear Mr. Shrig, for your kindness to one whose soul is widowed and solitary . . . God bless you!" So saying she turned and sped away, swift and light of foot, beneath the sombre trees until her slender form was lost amid the leafy dusk.

Then David, turning to frown upon Mr. Shrig, found him staring at an ominous bank of cloud that loomed upon the horizon, his lips pursed in their soundless whistle.

"Storm, pal!" said he, nodding towards this distant cloud. "Thunder and lightning, vind and rain afore morning — an' plenty on it!"

"And she, in her angelic simplicity, thanked you!" quoth David, his scowl deepening. "She prayed God's blessing on you! By Heaven, Jasper Shrig, there are times when you ought to feel ashamed of yourself and your methods!"

Mr. Shrig's habitual serenity seemed vaguely troubled; he glanced from David's accusing eyes towards that distant point where Miss Belinda's slender youthful form had so lately vanished; at last he sighed, shook his head, and finally spoke.

"Pal David . . . I did!"

"Did what?" demanded David.

"Ought!" answered Mr. Shrig, and turning his back forthwith, trudged heavily away.

CHAPTER XLVI

Of Happiness and Coming Storm

The warped and weatherbeaten stile, of which already some mention hath been made, stood in a leafy hollow remote from chance observation, deep in the kindly shade of blooming thickets and sheltering trees which made a leafy grove where thrushes and blackbirds sang gloriously of a morning and piped sweet sadness at dewy eve; and here of late David and Anticlea had been wont to meet.

Wherefore this evening David sat upon the stile, swinging booted legs a little impatiently and watching the path that wound away to lose itself amid rustling boskages.

Behind him the horizon loomed dark and ominous, black with a menacing shadow creeping ever nearer, but before him the west lay radiant with sunset.

But the glory faded, shadows began to creep thick and fast, and still this winding, solitary path remained deserted, the brooding silence unbroken. . . . The place became a cheerless solitude and himself a disconsolate soul lost in a dreary desolation. . . . David sighed despondent . . . But faint and sweet with distance the clock in Loring church tower began to chime the hour, nine silvery strokes — and then David was hasting upon joyous feet, for lo! she was there — speeding along this winding path through the fragrant dusk to meet his embrace, herself as sweet and fragrant as the night.

And now, leaning against the old stile hid in the kindly shade, how much they had to say, how much to

tell, how many questions to ask and be answered, but — with never a word or thought for such detestable things as Bow Street Officers, Mystery, or Murder — no, not one.

"How strangely still the world seems to-night, David! It almost makes me afraid!"

Feeling her shiver, he folded the cloak about her shapeliness and drew her closer.

"When will you be my wife, Anticlea?"

"Do you want me — so much, David dear?"

"More than life without you."

"O, I do love your voice, David, and the way you speak!"

"And here's myself trying hard to alter it."

"Then don't, sir — I forbid! . . . I love you as you are."

"Why, then, my Anticlea, when will you marry me?"

"When your doubts are all passed away, David — the doubts — those hateful doubts that still could not keep you from loving me . . . But tell me, sir, why is the Duchess offended with you?"

"Is she?" quoth David, "I wonder why?"

"To-day she dared to tell me — me, David! — that you were a very ordinary young man! And so I quarreled with her, of course, and I think she thoroughly enjoyed herself — I know I did!"

"Enjoyed yourself . . . ?"

"Of course, David dear! The Duchess, though overbearing and tyrannical and flinty-hearted, most unlovable and altogether hateful — as I told her, David — is delightful to quarrel with . . . which I did not tell her, you may be sure."

"But Anticlea, this — this is most distressing!"

"Dear man!" she sighed. "How should you understand? We quarrelled thoroughly and rid ourselves of so much pent emotion that it did us both good; by

this time the Duchess is beginning to love me, and I 'm sure I feel the most respectful affection for her."

"Amazing!" murmured David.

"No — quite natural, dear David. She next demanded if you had dared make love to me . . . I told her you had and that I was proud of your daring. Then she called you 'a fortune-hunting ploughman' and vowed she would discharge you . . . So I told her that if she did I should go with you . . . Then she called me 'a shameless baggage!' and I laughed . . . At this she mocked at my red hair — which made me really angry, David, as she knew it would . . . And so I told her if she threw away her horrible wig and left off raddling her cheeks, she might look almost human and less like a cheap Dutch doll . . . And, O David dear, she almost flew at me — the sweet old wretch — and could n't speak for nearly a second . . . and when she did — she actually repeated herself! Imagine my triumph, David — but you cannot — no man could — especially you, my David! . . . The end of it all was that she is determined to drag me off to London to-morrow — to her lords and marquises. But she shan't, David, she never shall — unless she has me drugged, for I can be determined, too!"

"And yet, my 'Clea, I would have you go — at once ——!"

"O David!"

"For just a little while, beloved . . . until this vile police business is over and done with . . . these Bow Street officers gone and the whole dreadful affair ended . . ."

"But, David — David dear, this will take a long, long time."

"Then I will come to you in London — I must, Anticlea, for I cannot be without you long, by Heaven!"

"O David!" she whispered, nestling closer in his

embrace, "O, but 't is wonderful you can love me so! I used to dream sometimes of what a great love might be . . . but never — O never of such love as ours . . . hush! Did you hear a rustling in the bushes yonder?"

"No, dear love . . . And though you leave me to-morrow, you take my heart with you, Anticlea . . . you will leave a poor, forlorn wretch behind, for life without you is less than nothing."

"O, David — David," said she, in weeping voice, "I wish to God I were better . . . more worthy such love . . . a gentler creature, David, more womanly . . . more tender and lovable . . . and my hair brown or gold or black or ——"

"Your red hair is my glory, girl!" he answered, kissing its silky tresses. "And it is you — you just as God made you, are the wife I want . . . And to-morrow, beloved . . . you will go —— ?"

"Yes, David, if you wish, though 't will almost break my heart. For my love grows and grows, David, until it is pain unless you are near . . . and London is miles and miles away . . . And you will grieve for me?"

"God knows it!" he answered fervently. "And yet, O my dear . . . my dear, 't is in my heart to wish you safe in London this very night."

"Why, David?"

"To-night they expect to . . . to clear up the Loring Mystery ——"

"To-night?" she whispered, and David felt her start, felt her soft body grow rigid in his arms. "Are they so sure?" she questioned in troubled voice. "What . . . what have they discovered?"

"I don't know," he answered, peering into her wide eyes, "Shrig will tell me nothing . . . Beloved, why do you tremble so?"

"To-night!" she repeated, and clung to him sud-

denly, "O, David . . . I must go!" And speaking, she clung but the tighter.

"Where?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where?"

"Back to the house . . . Ah, no, do not fear for me, David . . . your love goes with me always . . . my shield and comfort ever . . ."

Soft and sweet with distance the clock of Loring church began to chime the hour.

"Ten o'clock!" she whispered. "How quickly this hour has flown! . . . Loose me, beloved, I must go . . . Good night, my David — O, good night!"

"I will go with you ——"

"No, I shall be quicker alone . . . and I love to know you are waiting here by our dear old stile to watch me out of sight . . ."

"But it is so dark, dear heart ——"

"Yes . . . see that awful black cloud . . . Good night . . . and know, David dear, that I shall love you in this life — and beyond!"

So saying, she turned and sped away into the gloom; and leaning against the old stile David watched her flit from his sight, and in his heart a joy unspeakable, and in his mind dreams of a future that held a happiness all undreamed till now. Then behind him a bush rustled, he heard a sound of swift feet muffled in the grass and, wheeling about, came face to face with Frenzy.

"Maulverer!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XLVII

Which Telleth of Horror and a Great Fear

Rigid of form, pallid of face, with eyes that glared and hands that clenched and wrung each other, he fronted David silently for a moment, his breath labouring strangely; when at last he spoke, the words came in a wild rush:

"So, then, she truly loves you, sir — yes, yes — my eyes and ears are witnesses — she is yours by her own confession, and yours therefore, not mine, thank God, must be the hand to free her from the remorseless, oncoming shame and horror which nothing may withstand, whence is no escape for her — but death!"

"Death?" repeated David, recoiling before the speaker's awful look. "Are you mad?"

"Not yet, sir, no, not yet — though God only knows how near it I am — and with what cause! God alone knows what days and nights of agony I have endured for her sake! . . . How I have watched hourly and striven to avert the approach of that awful fate which must destroy her . . . utterly . . . horribly — must blast her body, her name and memory for ever! . . . Are you armed, sir? . . . Nay, take this — I shall not need it, I thank God, for now, since you are the man she loves, yours must be the hand to set her free . . . take this!" And with a swift gesture Mr. Maulverer drew a pistol from his breast and thrust it into David's grasp.

"Maulverer," cried he, glancing from the weapon to the other's ghastly face, "in God's name . . . what do you suggest?"

Mr. Maulverer glanced swiftly about him and leaned to David's ear.

"I am followed everywhere, watched, spied upon — as perhaps you know — listen!" he whispered. "I suggest it is better she . . . this woman we both love — this Anticlea who loves you, I say it is better she die to-night by the hand of him she loves rather than by the hangman!"

The word was the softest whisper, but David shrank back to the stile and leaned there weakly, while Maulverer, peering into his face, continued in the same hoarse, passionate whisper:

"For her there is no escape . . . God help her . . . no other way! Shrig knows all, and to-night ——"

"But she . . . she is innocent!" stammered David. "She must be . . . I feel it ——"

"Would to God she were!" gasped Maulverer, "I would give my life gladly — gladly to make it so . . . As it is she must die before it be too late — swiftly, cleanly, by the hand of one she loves! Think, man, the gallows . . . that white throat! The obscene gibbet . . . that tender body! God, the thought is madness — horror ——"

"She is innocent — innocent!" stammered David.

"NO!" cried Maulverer wildly, "NO! . . . God, man . . . I saw! Listen: You too were there that night; I recognised you as you knocked me down . . . Well, you asked me once why I kept this secret at the inquest — cannot you guess now? — I feared lest you had seen . . . what I saw! Why have I been slave to the beast Yaxley all these days and nights, feeding him, sheltering him? Because he saw . . . what I saw! For Anticlea's sake I have been his servant, damn him! . . ."

"And what — what did you see?"

"I saw her that night struggling in Sir Nevil's arms — her long hair all about them ——"

"And — did not interfere?"

"No, God forgive me! I knew 't would but make it worse for her some other time, and then I knew she was the stronger. So I crept back . . . out of sight and waited. Presently the struggling ceased . . . I heard her sobbing, and then Sir Nevil's voice speaking very softly. Then I heard her fly from him up the stair . . . but still I waited, and then . . . ah, then . . . she crept back again . . . I heard her foot, the rustle of her draperies! Sir Nevil spoke again in bitter anger and . . . after some while . . . laughed . . . and choked horribly! When at last I ventured into the room he was dead, with her dagger in his breast!"

"Then you did see her strike the blow?"

"No, but Yaxley did! . . . And to-night Yaxley will be taken . . . and he will speak — though Shrig knows already, I fear . . . And she will be . . . dragged away to the shame and horror of what must be unless you — you whom she loves — set her free by the one and only way . . . and follow her — out into the Unknown as I would have done gladly, gladly — I to whom death with her were better than life without her. Sir, she has given you the love she denied to me — be worthy of it, guard her, shield her — save her body from the sordid brutality of the law's blind and merciless vengeance! . . . Sir, I am done with Loring, we shall not meet again, but, by your love for her, I do conjure you — do your duty, free her from the shame, the ignominy and horror of what must and will be — if you hesitate! Help her to escape far beyond the reach of our fallible human law and go you beside her as I meant to do, I who . . . love her also, and losing her — lose all!"

So saying, with a wild, unearthly look and gesture, Eustace Maulverer turned and vanished into the darkness, leaving David sick with horror and a growing despair.

And presently out from the rustling dark stole a wind to fan hot cheek, to stir the hair upon pulsing temples — a stealthy wind that was, and was not, which came in fitful puffs growing ever stronger; a vague whisper, a murmur that rose to a sigh, to a moan, to a wail; a breath that swelled to a sudden rushing tempest.

Roused by this growing uproar, David glanced round about him from wild-tossing trees and swaying thickets to a gloomy heaven where crept a vast black cloud, an inky pall which, as he gazed, was riven asunder by a jagged lightning-flash followed by a crashing thunderclap that seemed to stun the very wind to silence. And in this quiet came the rain, a few great drops to splash upon David's upturned brow — very grateful and cooling. Then up rose the wind again, a bellowing fury now, to tear at groaning trees until they bowed and cracked, to fill the swirling darkness with flying twigs and leaves.

And standing amid this howling murk, buffeted by this raging wind, David thought only of Anticlea and of the unspeakable horrors which menaced her; horrors and dangers these which must and should be his also. And therefore, bowing his head against the driving rain, buttoning his coat against the rushing wind, David set forth.

Dazzled by the blue glare of lightning, deafened by pealing thunder, dazed by buffeting wind and lashing rain, he struggled on — splashing through swirling rainpools, slipping in slimy mud, stumbling over fallen branches, he held on at such speed as he might. But with every stride the tempest seemed to rage the fiercer: above hissing rain and bellowing wind the thunder roared near and far to shake the very firmament, with lightning, whose vivid glare showed a wild desolation grim and unearthly, blotted out in a sudden pitchy darkness wherein he crawled and stumbled with

feet unsure, with groping hand, and eyes that saw not . . . on and on he knew not whither until he blundered among swaying trees that shrieked to the buffets of roaring wind.

Grimly determined David struggled on until at last the lightning showed him a familiar wall, a high wall pierced by a small wicket, which, as he remembered, opened into Loring Park. Thitherwards he stumbled, and was close upon this wicket when out from its shadow loomed a dim form, and a hoarse voice bid him stand.

But what thing human might stay such lover on such errand? Unhesitating, David leapt, and there amid the elemental strife they grappled. The man was strong, but so was David and nerved by desperation; thus as they strove fast-clenched, David, heedless of himself, swung his assailant to the wall, felt the fellow's grip relax and, wrenching himself free, leapt the wicket and ran headlong.

Across undulating turf, beneath mighty trees he sped until he was among the denser gloom of hissing yews that bordered rain-lashed walks, groped his way to wet stone steps, and so at last reached the terrace of Loring Chase and leaned there panting and distressed, to fetch his breath, to peer up at the great, gloomy house and hark to the booming of the wind.

And now, having reached his destination, it seemed the storm was moderating, the thunder rolled farther and farther, the hissing downpour had well-nigh ceased, and out from ragged cloud peered the disk of a pallid moon.

Groping within damp pocket, David drew forth the silver-hilted dagger, crossed the wide terrace of a certain window and set himself to force the casement by means of the stout steel. And after some while, having worked the point between each frame, he contrived to lift the hasp and the lattice swung open: then David clambered through and softly closed it behind him.

Outside wind and thunder moaned and rumbled afar, and in place of vivid lightning-glare and howling darkness was the pale radiance of a fitful moon.

Sinking wearily upon the window-seat, David leaned back waiting for what was to be, and staring round about upon this dark chamber, this room wherein Sir Nevil Loring had died so horribly.

Little by little as the moonlight strengthened David began to discern adjacent objects: the bookcase, the desk, the elbow-chair — that same chair which once had held a ghastly, lolling shape whose sightless eyes and parted lips had leered heavenward in such awful mockery . . . Suddenly, as he gazed at this dim-seen chair, David started and shrank back with breath arrested, for surely . . . yes, beyond all doubt — something sprawled there still.

Motionless he gazed with an ever-growing horror and a sick dread of he knew not what, a dread so real that he must act at once lest it master him . . .

With hands tight-clenched . . . forcing unwilling flesh to obedience, David rose and slowly, step by step, began to approach that dreadful chair . . . nearer until he could perceive a head low-bowed . . . white hair . . . pale hands folded as in prayer . . . the folds of a dainty robe.

David's breath came in a great sob of relief, and in that moment the sleeper stirred, sighed plaintively and looked up.

"Miss Belinda!" he breathed.

"Why, is it you, Mr. David?" said she in soft, glad voice. "We are early, I think. And you find me asleep and dreaming — a wonderful dream ——"

"Why . . . why do you sit . . . in that chair?"

"Because I am nearer to Nevil here, where he died. Why, you poor boy, how wet you are! You will take cold, I fear . . . and you are shivering!"

"It . . . is nothing, madam."

"See, the storm is quite passed away. Yes, it will be a . . . glorious night later on, David. May I call you David?"

"Why, surely . . ."

"Anticlea has told me of your love for each other, and I am glad, so very glad, because now she will not be lonely when I leave her to-night."

"Leave her . . . to-night?"

"Yes, David. To-night my Nevil comes to claim me, to take me away with him at last . . . he has learned to love me truly at last . . . you see, I am his wife, David . . . I have kept it secret all these years because it was his wish . . . but to-night —— Why do you stare on me so, David?"

The moon had risen high and clear, and beholding her as she spoke, so slender and youthful despite snowy hair, seeing how she pillowed tender cheek caressingly to the cushions of this dreadful chair, how gently her slim hands stroked and patted its worn arms, David must needs contrast her gentle purity with the awful form that had once lolled there leering bitter mockery even in death.

"God!" he whispered. "How can you . . . sit — there?"

"I often do, David. You see, I loved him so . . . he was my husband and I killed him. David, to save him from himself . . ."

"You?" gasped David, "You . . .?"

"Yes," she sighed, "it was the only way . . . because I loved him! . . . He destroyed my youth, but I loved him. He broke my heart, but I loved him still. He shamed and humiliated me, yet still I loved him! But . . . O, David . . . he would have done a thing beyond all forgiveness — even mine! He would have sinned beyond all redemption, and so I killed him, David . . . I sent him back to God, who is so infinitely merciful because He understands."

"Was Anticlea . . . with you?"

"No, David. I was outside upon the stair, the door was open and I heard what Nevil said, heard her cry out in bitter shame, heard her fly from him, then I crept down and found him alone. I came to plead with him on my knees and he — kicked me . . . O, Nevil! . . . But I was beyond his reach and his shoe flew off . . . He was making a will in favour of Thomas Yaxley, and I snatched it away, weeping and praying the while. Then he told me again the unforgivable thing he meant to do . . . laughed at my prayers and tears . . . O, poor Nevil! . . . There was a dagger on the desk to my hand, so I took it and weeping, praying still, I killed him as he laughed . . . killed him, David, because I loved him. And he knows now, he understands at last . . . my love has not been in vain . . . my suffering, my broken heart . . . ah, no — to-night he is coming for me — his wife! To-night I shall be with him to comfort him, to share with him whatsoever God in His mercy shall ordain. And so to-night I am happy, David, yes, happier, I think, than I have ever been."

The gentle voice ceased and David saw that her face was radiant, her eyes uplifted in an ecstasy.

The clouds, it seemed, were all passed away, for through the window slanted a beam of pale moonlight; and David, mute and rigid, stared at this like one in a trance until roused by the touch of a gentle hand.

"Poor boy, and you are so wet!" she sighed. "And you have always seemed so lonely, with no one to care for you . . . but now there is Anticlea! And you love her, David — very dearly?"

"Ay, God knows it!" he answered hoarsely.

"And I pray God may bless you both, you and your love. . . . Listen! O, David, do you hear?" she whispered. "Do you hear him? He is coming at last . . . my Nevil is coming for me!"

Wide-eyed stood David scarcely breathing, for upon the air was a sound growing slowly louder, nearer — a sound that chilled him yet brought the sweat to brow and the palms of fast-clenched hands — soft, irregular . . . the tread of limping feet; louder, nearer, nearer yet, until David glared about him, peering into dim corners, his eyes wide with horrified expectancy.

And then a small, cool hand clasped his in firm and gentle pressure and in his ear a whisper of joyous, glad surprise:

"Look . . . O, David — look!"

From dark corner, slowly, silently out from the wall swung a length of the opposite bookcase, wider and wider until he visioned a black and narrow opening and in this opening a vague something that moved . . .

"Nevil?" With the word she was upon her feet, yearning arms outstretched, "Nevil . . . loved husband . . . O, Nevil!" David watched her slowly approach this nebulous shape, saw her start and turn to fling herself upon him bearing him staggering to the wall as came a blinding flash, a stunning report; and leaning weakly against the panelling, dazed by the suddenness and horror of it all, he was aware that Miss Belinda was back in the chair whispering, whispering in the dimness, and knew she uttered a prayer of passionate gratitude repeated over and over again:

"Dear God of Mercy . . . I thank Thee — I thank Thee!"

But, all at once, beyond that black opening in the corner rose sounds of desperate struggling, of blows and dull-trampling feet, but never a word or cry. Roused by this, David stole thither to peer into a thick darkness pierced suddenly by a jet of red flame, and leaping aside at the muffled explosion, he crouched to the wall staring upon that dread corner whence now issued a sound of footsteps, heavy feet that halted within the room itself; then forth of that dark corner

strode Jasper Shrig bareheaded, his face smeared with blood and a still smoking pistol in his fist.

Up started David to grasp his arm:

"What was it, Jasper, what was it?"

"Death, pal! 'T was him or me — and I 'ad to! Death it is, pal David, and another case sp'iled ——"

"Who — who was it?"

"The ghost, pal — T. Yaxley, for sure. . . . He's a-layin' back there vaitin' for my lads to cart 'im avay ——"

"Lying where, Jasper?"

"In the secret passage as leads from here to his cottage . . . I forced that 'ere door, pal! 'Oo did 'e shoot at?"

"I don't know . . . Miss Belinda was nearer ——"

"Miss Belindy — ha, vas she here, then?"

"She is here."

"Is she?" quoth Mr. Shrig, smearing blood from his face on coat-cuff, "look be'ind you, pal."

Turning hastily David saw the lattice standing wide; save for themselves the room was empty.

"Gone!" he exclaimed.

"Ah!" nodded Mr. Shrig, staring fixedly at something between chair and window. "And where d'ye sap-pose?"

"Heaven knows, Jasper."

"Ay, and so do I, pal! She's off to — stop a bit, the house is rose, the folks is all voke up an' small vonder! But this ain't no place for fe-males; help me lock the doors, pal — all on 'em!"

So they locked the doors while from overhead came a sound of startled voices, a hurry of footsteps, and presently a knocking on the door, together with the voice of the Duchess a little tremulous yet imperious none the less:

"Who is there? What is the matter?"

"Only me, mam — Jasper Shrig o' Bow Street, and

everything 's quite *compus mentus*, or — as you might say — blooming and serene, mam."

"What was all the shooting?"

"Only me an' the ghost, mam! Everything 's nice and qviet now, mam, and 'll stay partic'ler qviet 'enceforth. So git back to bed, your Grace, mam, and don't worrit, lady."

"Have you caught your murderer?"

"Yes, thank'ee mam! And now for Miss Belindy, pal — an' spry 's the vord!"

"Where is she?"

"From con-cloosions drawed, on her vay to the church ——"

"But how — how do you know?"

"Lord, pal — vhere 's your ogles? Look at this! An' this! An' here again at the vinder!"

"Blood!" gasped David.

"An' no error, pal! Ye see, she took vot was meant for you ——"

"God — yes! I remember now, Jasper! She sprang upon me. . . . O, Jasper — she saved my life . . . !"

"Werry likely, pal, you was a' easy mark in the moonlight for T. Yaxley's bullet. . . . Only if you 're a-comin' — come!"

The moon rode high and clear now and, having clambered out through the window, they saw the broad terrace splashed, here and there, with dark spots leading in the one direction.

"The church will be locked up at this hour!" said David, shivering in his wet clothes as they hurried on.

"She 'll get in some fashion, you can lay to that."

Reaching the sombre building at last, they found the massive door ajar, but paused upon the threshold, for the place was full of a soft singing wonderfully sweet and clear, though broken now and then by painful gasps. So they stood motionless a space, until the singing was hushed.

"Pal," whispered Mr. Shrig, "O, pal, I never knowed the like o' this!"

Then in the darkness of the porch David set his hands upon his companion's shoulders and leaned to his ear:

"Jasper," he whispered, "you will not take her . . . you cannot."

"Why, pal, I rayther think she's beyond the law . . . and I've wrote down this here Capital Act to T. Yaxley, vich — if not eggsackly ack'rate, is near enough for the authorities an' don't 'arm nobody!" So saying, he turned and led the way into the church.

She was kneeling before the Loring tomb, her head bowed against that time-worn stone so often wetted by her tears of late, but now moist with a darker, more precious stain, while from her failing lips stole a whisper:

"O God of Mercy . . . Thou knowest! . . . O gentle — O kind God . . . I thank Thee! . . . Yes, Nevil . . . my darling, I . . . am coming . . . No more grief for me . . . no more . . . loneliness for you . . . my beloved! Husband, reach me . . . your arms, take me — O Nevil . . ."

Mr. Shrig's ready arm was about her, a wonderfully gentle arm that lowered her until she lay, a smile upon her lips, a glory on her face, her white head pillowed upon that stone where ran the new-graven legend:

Sacred to the Memory
of
Sir Nevil Loring
Aged 52
Thirteenth Baronet.

"Angels . . . an' little children!" whispered Mr. Shrig, "O, pal, you can almost hear the beatin' of her wings!"

CHAPTER XLVIII

In Which all Doubts are Resolved

It is early morning; a glorious morning so far as sun can make it, a sun whose level beams, for the day is very young, cast long shadows on dewy grass; a fragrant morning redolent of teeming earth, with sweet, herby smells and the warm, rich savour of fast-ripening fruit. For, be it noted, July and August are spent and we are in September. And David, leaning from wide-flung lattice, looks out over a country of swaying cornfields ripe to harvest, of purple woods whose myriad leaves flame in a many-coloured glory of russet and gold, pink and scarlet, beyond which rise the gables of Loring Chase, that home of his ancestors, where for the past eight weeks a regiment of workmen have laboured amain. From this, turns David to survey so much as he may of himself in the inadequate mirror: his satin stock and snowy cravat, right cunningly tied; his perfect-fitting, high-collared blue coat and flowered waistcoat, and, the small mirror reflecting nothing lower, he glances down at snowy buckskins and glossy betasselled Hessians which are of themselves the very *ne plus ultra.*

And yet David's brow is furrowed and his eyes are a little anxious in their final survey as he takes up his modish hat, since to-day, for him, is an occasion, the very day of days.

Downstairs, early though the hour, a goodly breakfast awaits him, with Tom the landlord, that bullet-headed worthy, all ready to serve him with an eager deference not due to his so elegant attire:

"'Am, S' David?" he enquires. "Th' 'am 's prime,

S' David, but, then, so 's the beef, sir . . . which I should, therefore, suggest as you tries a bit o' both, sir."

"Both it is, Tom," answers David, taking his seat. "Pray what o'clock is it?"

"A quarter arter five, S' David, which do leave you nine hours an' a bit, the serrymonny bein' set for two o'clock 'sarternoon, sir, d'ye see!"

"So you know all about it, Tom?"

"Bless y'r 'eart — the 'ole village knows, sir — ah, an' wishes ye j'y into the bargain."

"And by Heaven, I believe they mean it, Tom."

"Sure as you 're born, sir! The pity bein' as you ain't a-doin' of it at Loring, sir."

"There were . . . reasons, Tom."

Here through the open window, together with the perfume of flowers from the garden, comes a sound of ponderous wheels, the plod of deliberate hoofs and jovial, albeit a peremptory voice:

"Avast, Polly Feemus — belay, Poll!" Ensues a tramp of quick-striding feet, and in at open lattice peers the smiling, good-humoured face of Jim Crook the Carrier:

"Mornin', Sir David!" says he. "Being jest about to stand away on my route, I takes the liberty to haul my wind and heave alongside to wish ye luck, sir — 'ealth, 'appiness, long life, good fortune an' a fair wind."

"Then God bless you, Jim!" answers David, with imperious gesture. "Come in, man, in with you and say it across a tankard . . . Tom, a pot of 'old' . . . nay, pots all round! In with you, Jim man!" So in strides the Carrier to stand hat in hand until David motions him to a chair, what time the ale is brought and the toast duly honoured.

"'T is pity Mus' Shrig ain't along, sir," sighs the landlord; "I never wets my whistle wi' a drop of 'old'

without thinkin' o' Mus' Shrig . . . 'e were a sharp 'un, 'e were — gimblets was nothing to 'e!"

"Ay, ay!" nods Jim. "His weather-eye was a-lifting — constant! And the way 'e run Tom Yaxley aboard ——"

"Ah!" quoth the landlord, "and tackled that theer ghost! Lord, it doan't do to mention ghostesses t' ol' Joel . . . spit at me, 'e did, las' toime — ay, 'e did so!"

"I do 'ear, sir," says the Carrier, "as the action do take place over to Glynde, 's arternoon."

"At Glynde, yes, Jim."

"Two o'clock!" nods the landlord. "In nine hours' toime!"

"Hum!" murmurs David, "I am a little early, it seems."

"An' I shall be late, sir!" said the Carrier, rising. "My Polly, though sure, is precious slow — like the old *Dreadnought* ninety-four! I must be goin', sir."

"Then you shall drive me as far as the cross-roads, if you will, Jim," says David, rising also.

"With all my 'eart, S' David, though my waggin ain't for clo'es the likes o' yourn, sir. But if you'm so minded, I'd be proud, sir."

"I am so minded," answers David, clapping on his hat. Then, having shaken Tom the landlord's honest hand, forth he strides to climb nimbly aboard the waggon; whereupon Jim clambers after him, shakes the reins and commands Polyphemus to "heave ahead." This sagacious and haughty animal having duly considered the suggestion, cocked an ear, lifted a leg, pondered a moment — put it down again and snorted.

"Now then, Poll . . . " remonstrates the Carrier; but at this moment hurrying steps are heard, and Mr. Sprowles presents himself in a state of perspiring obsequiousness and, having bowed, touches his hat and bows again and, removing his hat altogether, stands with it clasped to his labouring breast:

"Sir David, sir . . . your honour," he gasps, "I 'astens to take the liberty on this 'ere ospelatious and most momentatious occasion, to 'umbly beg your honour's leave to wish your honour all 'ail, Sir David, and likewise good fortun' and j'y, your honour, more especially me being one wi' a eye for 'THE QUALITY', and an 'eart — sir, as'umbly throbs in its lowly speer, a loyal 'eart and ——" But at this moment Polyphemus, uttering an expressive snort, starts off, and Mr. Sprowles is left bowing in the dust of their departure.

And now as the heavy waggon creaks onward by shady, winding ways they talk of many and divers things: of their first meeting; of the bounteous crops to be harvested; of the weather; of "Old Boney"; of Loring and the many changes and improvements David has wrought, but never a word of Crime or Criminals, for the Loring "Mystery" is nine weeks old and fast receding into the limbo of forgotten things.

Reaching the cross-roads, Polyphemus condescends to halt, and down springs David forthwith.

"Good-bye, Jim," says he, "Loring is my home henceforth, and we, being neighbours, must remain friends always."

"Ay, ay, Sir David — and heartily!" answers the Carrier, touching an eyebrow, and presently lumbers and creaks upon his accustomed way.

David is sitting upon the old stile which, by reason of its decrepit age, has often propped full many an expectant youth ere now, but surely never one quite so tremulously eager, or one who gazed upon the narrow, winding path with eyes of such expectant yearning as our David.

Birds carolled near and far, but what are they to him? Throstle and merle piped tender sweetness from

the adjacent grove; but David's ears were strained for a sound far sweeter to him than any song, carol, fluting or piping, since birds first chirped — the light, quick tread of feet hasting himwards, such sound as his ears had hungered for this age-long, weary eight weeks.

Thrush and blackbird vied with each other in harmonious rivalry, filling the leafy grove with liquid runs and trills; but how should David hear or heed? This David who, as time passed, grew impatient, despairing and anxious in as many moments, until at last from frilled shirt-bosom he drew a folded paper and opening it scanned it through — for all the world as if he did not know its every word by heart! Yes, there it was, "seven o'clock" sandwiched between a "beloved" and a "dear" . . . Well, then, something vital must have detained her, beyond all question! . . . Ha — she was ill! . . . Heaven help him — an accident, perhaps!

David sprang from the stile in sudden agitation . . . But soft and sweet with distance stole the chime from Loring Church tower — seven mellow strokes.

A sound of iron upon stone! Hoof-strokes muffled in dewy grass — and She was before him, mounted upon a horse whose labouring flanks proclaimed speedy travel . . . She was riding towards him, her shapely form swaying gracefully to her steed's every movement . . . she was looking down at him beneath the shadow of her hat — and in her eyes a glory.

"David!"

As she breathed his name he was beside her, his arms reached up to lift her down and, sighing happily, she swayed to his eager clasp; now, having her in his arms, upon his heart between heaven and earth, he must fold her so awhile to kiss her, and she, being the Anticlea she was, kissed him again.

"Nine weeks, David!" she murmured. "Nine weary weeks!"

"But to-day," he whispered, "O, my Anticlea . . . to-day——"

"To-day," she sighed, "you wear your hair shorter than it was!"

"And you," he answered, "are even more beautiful than I dreamed."

"Do you think so, David—do you truly think so?" she questioned, her arms tightening a little, "and I have not slept all night . . . I could not . . . And this morning I dressed by a guttering candle . . ."

Now came they to lean beside the ancient stile, and having so very much to say, said nothing—content to gaze into each other's eyes, happy in each other's nearness.

"Our dear old stile!" said she at last, "I had to steal away . . . to meet you here, David, on this day of all days! Often we shall come here in the future, my David, I hope . . . but to-day, O, David, to-day we leave the old life behind—for ever."

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed, "For . . . O, Anticlea, in that old life I . . . suspected you——"

"And, indeed—indeed I had given you enough cause, David . . . And then . . . at first I doubted you also . . . But when I discovered the truth—when I knew you were guiltless . . . O, then, my dear—my dear—I was so happy, so wonderfully happy that nothing else mattered in all the world . . . no, not even your suspicions of me, because you loved me—in spite of all, David! . . . And I dared not speak—even to you, for . . . her dear sake . . ."

"Yes," said David, "Jasper Shrig called her an angel, and I think he was right."

"I know he was, David!"

"So to-day, my Anticlea, begins a new life for us, and I pray a happier, better, nobler life than I have ever known . . . God make me worthy!"

"And me also, David."

"Though, indeed, Anticlea, you must needs be a 'Loring' after all!"

"What matter so long as I am David Loring's wife?" she said in her tenderest voice. "And O, David, I will try to be all you would have me . . . yes, in spite of my red hair!"

The horse cropped contentedly at the lush grass beside the path, the blackbird, forgetting his autumnal sadness awhile, piped a bubbling trill of sheer gladness, the sun sent an inquisitive beam to peep through the rustling leaves; for surely no lovers who ever sighed and kissed by this ancient stile had ever done so with more eager yet reverent happiness.

From distant tower stole a silvery chime proclaiming the day eight hours old.

"I must go, beloved," sighed Anticlea at last, "I must leave you . . . but only until two o'clock!"

"Six weary hours!" he mourned.

"Only six!" she murmured. "Only six, David, and I shall be yours until the end of life — and beyond, dear love, so long as I am I."

THE END

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